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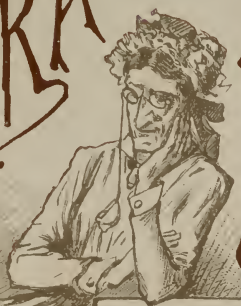
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ALTIORA PETO



“ ‘Just you come and sit down here, alongside of me, and don't talk,’ she said, making room for him. ‘I ain't no new maid, and I wish I warn't an old one.’ ”—PAGE 68.

ANTHORA PETO



BY
LAURENCE
OLIPHANT
AUTHOR OF
"PICCADILLY,"
"TRAITS & TRAVESTIES" &c.
VOL. I.



ALTIORA PETO

BY

LAURENCE OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'PICCADILLY,' 'TRAITS AND TRAVESTIES,' ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. I.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

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ALTIORA PETO.



CHAPTER I.

ALTIORA'S FIRST PROBLEM.

MAMMA wants to know what I am always scribbling,—if she was a more sympathetic person I shouldn't always scribble—I should pour my heart out into her confiding bosom instead of upon blank sheets of paper; but it is not possible to feel one's self bursting with thoughts without giving them expression in words. If they are not spoken ones, they must be written ones. I have always had a strong impression that I should have found a congenial nature in the late Mr Peto — I mean papa — who died before I was born, and who was a profound but eccentric philosopher, with a quaint vein of

humour, of which, indeed, I am the victim; for his dying request to mamma was, that if I was a girl, I should be called *Altiora*—thus making me the subject of a gentle pun, that will stick to me till I die, or marry. It was a sort of moral legacy which he left me in default of anything more substantial—a perpetual reminder that I was to soar; and then he peacefully passed away, “from waste of nervous tissue,”—at least that was what mamma says the doctors called it. They might as well have said protoplasmic decay, or simpler still, “want of breath,” as far as any real apprehension of the matter on their part went.

I have a great many odd feelings about papa: one is that I am morally convinced that the whole of my character is affected by the fact of his having died prior to my birth. Although I am not a spiritualist, I have an indefinable consciousness that he has, in consequence, been able to exercise an occult influence over me from the first moment of my existence, which would not have been possible had he remained in the flesh. One of my earliest recollections is overhearing mamma say “that I was the strangest child”—that she couldn’t make

me out—that I was old-fashioned. It made an impression upon me at the time. I must have been about five then, and I have been thinking over it ever since, until it has acquired the force of a positive certainty—that in a sort of way, if I may venture so to express myself, I am pervaded by his essence, and that, both morally and intellectually, his spiritual nature in some subtle manner is constantly operative within me. I suppose that is why I have so little sympathy with other girls. In the first place, life does not seem to present them with any problems; they believe everything they are told, take everything as it comes, see no contradictions anywhere, and do not seem haunted by the standing obligation which has been laid upon me to “seek higher things.” They grovel;—I don't wish to seem uncharitable—but they really do, and are content. To me life is a perpetual enigma, to which no theological system offers a satisfactory solution—against the reefs of which all philosophies break into foam and empty bubbles. Though I am scarcely nineteen yet, I could have hopelessly puzzled either the Archbishop of Canterbury or Mr Herbert Spencer when I was ten. It was at that early age, when

subjected to youthful struggles in regard to the claims of what was called my "conscience," that I first became alive to the perplexing questions arising out of the nature and composition of what was called my "will." And to this day I can give no satisfactory definition of the word "freedom" in connection with it; but then I am still very young. Perhaps if I had arrived at some conclusion I should know better what to do about Mr MacAlpine. We have taken a cottage in the Highlands for the season, and Ronald MacAlpine is the younger brother of Lord MacAlpine, from whom we have rented it. We have seen a great deal of each other during the last three weeks; and his constant presence suggests a problem that other girls seem to have no difficulty about. I have never experienced the sensation before, but I feel no moral doubt that I am in love. To me love is a puzzle, to them it is a pleasure. I don't mean to say that there is not a good deal of pleasure in it, but that makes the puzzle all the more annoying. What is it? Where does it come from? Did it first come from him or from me? I don't like going headlong into a thing without knowing a little more about it. Shall I go this afternoon

and take a sketch on the beach, where he will, in the most promiscuous and accidental manner, certainly go for a stroll? He has found out the quiet corner where the rocks are so picturesque, but he does not go there unless he sees me, because he says they're nothing without a bit of colour in the foreground. So I think I shall escape him by putting on my black dress, because I really ought to finish my sketch.

Let me analyse. First, there is no necessity to finish the sketch. What was it in me that tried to humbug me with a pretence of duty? Second, I should not avoid him by dressing in black, and I knew it when I internally proposed it. Evidently the same influence with the same malign intent. Third, and still more subtle, when he came I could pretend that, by not wearing colour, there would be no attraction in the foreground, and that, therefore, I wanted to avoid him, when I really did not, and that I was surprised to see him when I really was not; in other words, false assumption of maiden modesty. I don't exactly know the definition of coquetry, but I should say this was a near approach to it, and must be resisted. It is evident there is a strong impulse acting on my

will to go and meet him. I suppose it is the force of attraction. If so, what is the nature of the force? Is it magnetic? And how does it operate on my will in such a manner as apparently to paralyse it; and then what becomes of its so-called freedom? I suppose if I was to tell the learned persons who talk about waste of nervous tissue, that I found Mr MacAlpine a highly magnetic individual, they would reply, "Pooh, pooh, my dear young lady! don't use unscientific terms — you're in love," and consider that a scientific explanation. But I suppose love is a force, just as, I am told, light and heat are, and may be made of molecules, for all they know to the contrary. I wonder why they cannot subject it to scientific analysis. It has a very distinct effect on the circulation of the blood, that is certain, or my heart would not beat so when I see what I suppose I must call "the object of my affections" in the distance. No doubt, when he perceives the bit of colour he is looking for on the beach; the same thing happens to him, and yet he has never uttered a word which betrayed his feelings. Hitherto we have discussed principally the beautiful nature by which we are surrounded, from a philosophic and

æsthetic point of view. We have discoursed on the science of taste and its possible refinements with our lips, while our hearts seemed to be saying something quite different. I don't know how, but they have. The worst of it is, that this silent language is quite irrepressible. Just when my countenance is most impassive and my mind most concentrated in its attempt to grasp the ideas of my companion, that rebellious organ seems to bawl its unspoken language the most loudly. Probably here, again, it is the same with him. This arises, I presume, from what we termed "the hidden laws of sympathy," whatever they may be.

I have just come back from the beach. I went there deliberately—or, in other words, because I could not help it; I was drawn. So I did not go through the farce of pretending that I was either surprised or annoyed when I saw Ronald appear. I call him Ronald now—not, of course, to his face, but to myself. He is tall, dark, and in his Highland dress looks the *beau-ideal* of a Scottish chief. I am afraid, even if he had not been so very clever and agreeable as he is, I should still have liked him on account of his *tout ensemble*. Why this mysterious senti-

ment, which I am now experiencing for the first time, should depend so much upon the accident of external appearance, is another puzzle. Can it be possible that so deep a passion can really have any connection with clothes and colour, or that I should have felt differently towards him in trousers?

We were both slightly embarrassed when we met thus "accidentally on purpose," as it were, to use a somewhat slang expression; and yet I don't know why we should have been,—there was nothing to be ashamed of. I became internally indignant, and conscious of a strong instinct of maidenly reserve struggling with a self-assertion which I take to be nearly allied to woman's rights. Of course I don't know what emotions were contending in him, but he looked decidedly nervous, and I think I became uncomfortable sympathetically.

"How do you like the bit of colour in the foreground?" I said; and I showed him his manly form arrayed in a bright red kilt of his own tartan, which I had just painted in.

"You do me too much honour, Miss Peto," he replied, and his face for a moment reflected the tints of his garment. "I should much pre-

ferred to have seen you there : but the omission may easily be remedied," he added timidly ; "there's room enough on the beach for both of us, you know."

As this was an obvious truism, I proceeded to put myself in at the opposite corner of the picture, with my back to him. "All pure coquetry," I said to myself as I did so, "or else a degree of shyness amounting to insincerity." Why should modesty make one dishonest? I should have liked to paint us in the attitude of Millais's picture—he holding my face between his two hands, and looking lovingly down into my eyes, while I looked tenderly up into his.

He was looking over me as I was thinking thus, when he said, suddenly, "I know what your thoughts are, Miss Peto."

"Do you?" I said calmly, again forcing myself to lie horribly by the cool indifference of my face and manner, for I was in an internal agony of agitation and alarm lest the quickness of his sympathy should have actually divined what was passing through my mind.

"Yes," he said. "You think my remark impertinent, and this is how you are rebuking it."

"On the contrary, I thought what you said

very natural. Why should we not both be on the beach in the picture, since we are both upon it in fact?"

"Yes; but *we* seem to have quarrelled in the picture, and we have not in fact. Do you know how I should like to be painted?" and he gently but firmly took my hand and pressed it to his lips. Of course I should have liked to let him keep it, so I snatched it away, and suddenly began to tremble very violently. This shows how utterly incapable the will is under certain circumstances to control the organism. The hatred and contempt I felt for my own body at that moment was indescribable. Why should it possess a power of humiliating me at a time when all my feminine instincts, which, I suppose, are my noblest, made me wish to disguise my real feelings towards him? On the other hand, what was there humiliating in allowing him to perceive that I returned his affection? If I was angry with my body for humiliating me, I felt equally angry with my soul, or whatever the other part of me is, for feeling humiliated. I got so absorbed in this physiological dilemma, that for a moment I forgot all about him, and putting down my paint-brush—it was my left

hand he had kissed—I clasped them both together and gazed vacantly out to sea.

“Dear Altiora,” he went on, “forgive me; I spoke too suddenly, but it was quite impossible for me to restrain my feelings any longer. Ever since we first met I have waited for this supreme moment. I know that I am only a younger son, and have little to offer you but a heartfelt love, and a nature all sympathy.” And so he went on,—I suppose very much the usual thing, only it sounded rather as if it had been prepared beforehand, still it was very pleasant to listen to at the time. I forget a good deal of what he said, for I had so many conflicting emotions to contend with that I did not attend very closely. I think the predominant one was an all-pervading sense of content and happiness, and for some reason my eyes filled with tears. I wonder why one thought has the physical result of producing water in the eye, while another will make all the muscles round one’s mouth contract with laughter. Evidently the physical result is conditioned on the moral attribute connected with the emotion. In other words, these various emotions are forces, and act dynamically on the organism according to their moral com-

position, totally irrespective of the will. When Ronald saw my unresisting eyes filled with tears, and an involuntary expression of deep joy flushing a countenance over which I had lost control, he took me in his arms. I had already risen under some undefinable impulse, and in another moment we were in the attitude my mind had pictured, and which had previously suggested itself to Millais. Then I laid my hand on his shoulder and wept silently, and gently disengaged myself, and felt I ought to say something. I had not known what to say as yet—at least not out loud. Of course my heart had been saying a good deal, but I felt it was not to be trusted under the circumstances—and, in fact, that it was seriously disturbing the normal action of the brain. So I said softly, “Please go away, and let me sit down and think.”

“I will let you sit down,” he replied, “but don’t drive me away; and as for thinking, has not your heart told you all? what more do you want to know? It has told me, darling, that you love me.”

“My heart does not think,” I answered, “and I have not told you anything yet. You’ve taken me so much by surprise, I don’t know

what to say. Please don't ask me to answer you now ;" and then, in despair, I took refuge in the duty I ought to have thought of at first, and rising to go away, said, "besides, I must ask mamma."

"I will come here to-morrow at this hour to hear her decision," he said, as he gave my hand a parting squeeze which I continued to feel for some little time afterwards.

I wondered as I walked home whether I had behaved as other girls would have done under the same circumstances, and confessed to a sense of mortification in the reflection that my conduct had not been by any means so strikingly original as I should have predicted it would have been whenever an event of so much importance should occur to me.

I have already said that my mother and I never understood each other, and I had a sort of presentiment that this was a subject upon which we should be more than ever mutually incomprehensible. For some reason she never seemed to like Ronald MacAlpine, and I thought had always behaved rather rudely to him. As, however, she had been educated in France, and, indeed, had lived most of her life in Paris before

her marriage, and could never quite get over her foreign prejudices, I thought it might only be his bare knees she objected to, and it would be ridiculous to allow them to be an insuperable obstacle to our marriage, particularly as we should probably live in England, where he would have to abandon his native costume.

I may here incidentally observe that it has always been a matter of astonishment to me how a mother and daughter could be so unlike each other; and after reading Mr Galton's book 'Heredity,' I quite regretted that I had no brothers and sisters, as, I am sure, we should have presented extreme varieties of type. As it is, I suppose I take after my father. I am at least six inches taller than my mother, who is a stout, round, brisk, little woman, very practical and matter-of-fact, with a *nez retroussé*, light hair, grey eyes, and a temper to match; whereas I am dark, tall, and by no means rapid or impulsive in my movements, and if I may venture to say so, equable in disposition, though perhaps not as yielding as I ought to be. She was knitting with unwonted rapidity when I went into her room to tell her what had just occurred on the beach, and I judged from the pace at which

her fingers were moving that her thoughts were of an agitated character.

“Where have you been, child?” she burst out; “it is past six, and the tea is quite cold. I told you the other day that I disapproved of these afternoon disappearances. You told me at lunch you were going into your room to write.”

“So I did, mamma,” I replied; “and when I had done writing, I went down to the beach to sketch.”

It had become evident that I could not have chanced upon a more unpropitious moment.

“Let me look at your sketch,” she said suspiciously. “Why, you seem to have put yourself into it. Who is the man in the kilt?”

“The gentleman in the kilt,” I returned with emphasis, for I felt stung by the sneer, “is Mr Ronald MacAlpine, and it is about him I wish to speak to you. He has just asked me to be his wife.”

“His wife, indeed,” said my mother with a sort of snort. “What business has any man, much less a bare-legged pauper, though he is the brother of a ruined Scotch peer, to speak to you on such a subject? It is more than impertinent, it is positively indecent. If he had any sense of

propriety, he must have seen that I did not encourage him; and if you had had any sense of propriety, you would have kept out of his way, and not permitted yourself to be insulted. I feel quite ashamed of you."

"I don't think there is anything to be ashamed of," I retorted; "I did not propose to him, though I am not sure that I should have felt ashamed of myself if I had. It has always struck me as an anomaly," I continued, musingly, "which I have never been able to explain satisfactorily to myself, why a woman should not be allowed to choose her husband as freely as a husband chooses his wife."

My recent experience had been a practical refutation of this theory, but my mother had roused my spirit of contradiction, by her unreasonable opposition, to a degree which made me overshoot the mark the other way. I am constantly in the habit of doing this in argument, and it often puts one at a terrible disadvantage. It did upon this occasion. Instead of putting my mother in a rage, she laughed.

"I am glad you have spoken so frankly," she said. "As you have taken the matter so completely into your own hands, and as you are so

fond of your pen, you can write him a letter which I will dictate. And for the future remember this,—you may propose to as many men as you like, but the man you will marry will be the man of my choice, not of yours; and the person to whom he will make the proposal will be me, and not you. Now,” continued my mother—who, as I have remarked, was a woman of very prompt action—“there is no time to be lost;” and she rose and prepared the writing materials. “Here is a pen,”—and placing a pen in my hand, she threw herself back on the couch, half closed her eyes to facilitate the task of composition, and began—“Sir.”

At this point I could struggle against my pent-up feelings no longer. Throwing down the pen, I rushed up to my room, locked the door, burst into an agony of tears,—and there I am still.

CHAPTER II.

ALTIORA SOLVES THE PROBLEM.

I HAVE not seen anybody since yesterday, except the maid, who brought me in some dinner. This does not arise from temper, but from the absolute necessity which I feel imposed upon me by my name to analyse my emotions calmly, review the situation, and think out deliberately what, from the highest point of view, is the right thing for me to do. My brain was so disturbed at first, that after I recovered from my fit of weeping, I read an article of Mr Mallock's to soothe it—then I reflected. First, there was my duty to my mother; then there was my duty to Ronald; and last, but not least, there was my duty to myself. Then I thought of a higher duty than any of these—one which comprised them all. The problem has, of course,

often been presented to young ladies before in some form or other, but it is not until one has to deal with it one's self that one discovers the extreme difficulty of its solution. I had scarcely begun to reason it out before I found that I was not in possession of all the premisses. First, I was in total ignorance of the nature of the sentiment in my own case with which I had to deal. I had, it is true, a certain empirical knowledge of it, but it had only fully and powerfully developed itself in me within the last twenty-four hours, and those had been so stormy that I had been unable to analyse anything. Then if I could not define exactly what I felt myself, how was it possible to know what Ronald felt? And finally, as the whole affair was purely subjective, and affected only us two, what in the world could mamma know about it? It seemed to me that the right course for her to have pursued would have been, first, to give me all her own experience (for she had been married before she married papa, besides, I believe, having been several times in love in her youth); and then, when she had told me all she knew about it, she ought to have advised me not to give any definite answer to Ronald,

or to act hastily, but to explain to him, that the question being one upon which the happiness of our lives depended, we must search ourselves thoroughly, so as to guard against any mere superficial feeling, and put ourselves through various tests and ordeals. My own impression is—but of course I speak without the smallest experience—that it is a matter upon which it would be impossible to come to any safe and definite decision within a year; and if mamma had left it to my judgment, that is what I should have told Ronald, and no amount of supplication on his part would have made me change my resolution. Instead of which, the more I think of it, the more it seems to me that the speech which she made me was utterly irrational and absurd. It amounted, in fact, to this, that I was to have no voice in the selection of my own husband. The only argument in favour of this mode of proceeding is, that I believe it is the one adopted by the French. Perhaps as they are rather a logical people, they may have a good reason for it; but I shall certainly ask mamma to explain it to me. In the meantime, it is quite impossible for me to come to any decision until I know why she objects to Ronald. Clearly

my course is, therefore, now that I have had a night's rest and am calm, to discuss the subject with her in all its bearings as fully as I can induce her to do; and then, before acting in any way, to come back and think. I shall, at all events, have more data to go upon.

I had just come to this determination, when a smart tap at the door warned me that the object of my meditations was upon the other side of it. I was glad of this. I have a theory that environment is not altogether without a sort of moral value. As people are made up of forces, by which they are reciprocally affected, either positively or negatively, it is not unnatural that these should be affected by the conditions attaching to certain localities. Thus I should be more positive to my mother in my own room, surrounded as it were by my own moral atmosphere, than I should be in hers, where, on the contrary, she would have a corresponding advantage. Dogs, which I take to be remarkably sensitive animals, magnetically furnish so striking an illustration of this, that it has become proverbial; and we constantly witness most abject cowardice on the part of a dog, succeeded by defiant confidence, by mere contact with his

own doorstep. I am always conscious of deriving, in some subtle manner, a moral strength of some sort, conditioned on my surroundings; and hence it was that I said, "Come in," to my mother, with a feeling of some relief. She was in a very amiable mood, suspiciously so, and came up and kissed me—rather an unusual thing with her.

"My dear," she said, "you took me so much by surprise yesterday, that I am afraid I spoke with more warmth than I should have done, if I had been prepared for the news you communicated so abruptly and unexpectedly. Let us talk it over quietly now, and I think I shall be able to convince you that I am consulting your own interests in refusing to consent to your marriage with Mr MacAlpine."

"I have no doubt," I replied, "that you would not have spoken so strongly without good reason, and I was just coming down to ask you to tell me what it was when you knocked."

"Well, dear," she went on, "from inquiries which I have made, I find Mr MacAlpine's income amounts to £300 a-year, which his brother allows him. It is true that he has been called to the bar, but, so far as I am aware, he has never

held a brief; and I should say, from what I am informed of his habits of life in London, if he had one, he would be extremely at a loss to know what to do with it. Still, as he is the brother of a peer, and has a certain social reputation of a flimsy kind, as a dabbler in literature, music, and art—though I am not aware that it adds very materially to his resources—I don't know that I should have been so decided in my opposition if the Baron and I had not formed other plans for you; and when you know what these are, I feel sure that you will quite agree with us. Last year we were obliged to go abroad, so the next will be your first London season; and it would be foolish of you to make up your mind in these barren hills on a question which affects your whole future, until you know what the world has to offer. Believe me, my dear child, we shall spare neither pains nor money to make you a success."

"But, mamma," I said, "I don't want to be a success. I don't think it likely that I shall find any one in London I like better than Ronald; and I shall refuse every offer, if any are made, no matter how advantageous they may be, for his sake, if I find, on further acquaintance, that

we thoroughly suit each other. You see I am not in the least impulsive or romantic on the subject."

"Well, darling," she replied, "I don't wish to press you; I merely wish you to understand the necessity of not committing yourself in that direction, because neither your step-father nor I will ever consent to your marrying Mr Mac-Alpine. You will very soon get over the passing sentiment you entertain for him. I know this love from experience. Before my marriage with my first husband, the Baron's partner, I was very much admired, and indeed was engaged once to an Italian officer, to whom I was passionately attached, but his parents would not hear of the match: he was killed afterwards in a duel." And my mother touched her eyes with a corner of her pocket-handkerchief. "And Mr Crombie, my first husband, attended his funeral; for poor Vittorio had remained my greatest friend after my marriage. There are so many kinds of love, dear, as you will find out when you have more experience, and the one need not necessarily extinguish the other."

Part of this speech took me so excessively by surprise, and part of it was so enigmatical, that for some moments I felt bereft of the faculty of

speech. The idea of having several kinds of love—at least outside of one's natural affections for one's relations—was so entirely novel, that I felt I should have to think over the whole matter alone in my room; so I said, "Thank you, dear mamma; I am very much obliged for this explanation, and I will think about it."

"But, dear, I want you to act upon it. You must not allow Mr MacAlpine to remain any longer under a delusion."

"I can only promise you," I replied firmly, "that I will immediately give the matter my most earnest consideration. Until I have done that, I absolutely decline to commit myself to any course of action."

"How the child takes after her father!" said my mother, rather snappishly, aloud to herself. Then seeing I was perfectly fixed in my resolution, she came and kissed me again, and said, as she left the room, "Well, dear, now that you know what my wishes are, I will rely upon your sense of duty to give effect to them, without dictating to you the method in which it is to be done."

My mother made a mistake when she made that spiteful allusion to my father's firmness.

She would not have been guilty of the indiscretion in her own room; but I have always felt that mine was pervaded by his influence, and it was forced out of her in spite of herself, as she became instinctively conscious that I was inspired with his fixed determination of will, which imposed itself upon hers, and induced her to refrain from pushing me any further. In all that she had said, it was the one sentence that imparted a profound comfort, and certainly decided me, as far as in me lay, to avoid taking after my mother.

And this, again, led me to ponder upon that strange fate which always presented itself to my mind under a veil of mystery, which had snatched the author of my being from this earth before I had appeared upon it; and I gazed upon the photograph, which was my greatest treasure, with a never-flagging wonder and curiosity. My mother was very reticent in regard to my father, with whose pursuits she evidently had had but little sympathy. She says the subject is too painful for her to recur to, and shrinks from all allusion to it with so much feeling, that I have avoided all reference to it for some years past. All that I know of him is, that he was the only son of a superannuated old general, from whom he

inherited a large fortune, which had been made in India, and that my grandmother, who had died some years before her husband, was a daughter of the Earl of Sark. I am consequently full second cousin of the present Earl—a fact which my mother seems far more alive to than the Earl,—though he is almost the only relation I have got, at least that I know; for my mother's belongings all emigrated to Australia when she was young, and from hints that she has let drop, I think she began life as a governess with an Italian family, and then she married Mr Crombie, Baron Grandesella's partner. They were merchants, or in business of some sort, I never could quite make out what; but after his death she married papa, who died before I was born, and then she married the Baron.

Ever since, in my early childhood, my attention was called to a duckling which had been hatched by a hen, I had seemed to occupy the same unnatural relation to my mother. The Baron always made the impression upon me of a turkey gobbler, in a perpetual state of strut, and Mr Murkle, the Baron's partner, of a hawk, who only refrained from pouncing upon the hen and the gobbler because they were too big,

but who never took his carnivorous eye off me. I feel him perpetually hovering above me. If ever there was a man whom one word could describe, "Murkle" is the man, and "pounce" is the word. This is the sort of domestic barnyard in which I have been brought up. I have roamed with the gobbler, the hen, and the hawk through all the capitals of Europe. We took contracts, we founded banks, we obtained concessions, we started companies. The Baron swelled and strutted through the financial political world of Europe, Mr Murkle pounced upon it, and my mother made friends with other hens, and scratched its surfaces, and pecked away at what she found with great assiduity. We have always lived with the extravagance of potentates,—I don't mean German princes, but magnates of the highest order. That I was being carefully brought up for something, I soon discovered; but nothing could cure my unfortunate propensity to swim—in other words, to study. I was unable to have a laboratory, and go in for chemistry as I should have wished, because of the regulations against travelling with explosive materials; but I had a trunk full of books on science and philosophy, which broke the backs of the railway

porters, and the heart of my mother,—at least it injured, if not her heart, her temper. I steadily objected to wasting my time on what are termed accomplishments. The Baron spared no expense to procure me the best masters, but in vain. Languages came to me as naturally as any other kind of swimming; and I have a taste for art, which is the chief consolation of my mother, who always tries to make me display my erudition on the subject in society, which I naturally decline to do; in fact, if there is a thing I detest, it is society. As for the purple and fine linen in which both my mother and myself are arrayed, the money spent upon it annually would maintain hundreds of starving pauper families. The Baron, who used to allow me an ample allowance of pin-money, cut me down last year because mamma discovered that I made what she called an improper use of it in relieving distress; but I have, nevertheless, several pensioners in various parts of the world, whom I maintain on the sale of the lace and embroidery which I unpick from the flounces of my petticoats, and send them the money by post-office orders: Johnson, my maid, who enters enthusiastically into my schemes, being pledged to secrecy.

The effect of being so entirely out of sympathy with my belongings, and of finding myself forced into a life so little congenial to me, has been to develop my inherited tendencies in a premature and irregular fashion; and it therefore becomes all the more essential, now that the important question of choosing a partner for life is concerned, to be quite sure that we are thoroughly in accord as to our hopes and aims. So far I had not had any opportunity of discovering whether Ronald, under his agreeable social exterior and varied accomplishments, possessed those qualities and moral aspirations which I longed to find in some one to whom I could unburden my own feelings. These are subjects one does not rush into lightly; and so reticent is my tendency in regard to them, that I did not wonder at his silence on questions affecting the deeper problems of life. It became, therefore, extremely necessary to know what we had in common, and only right that, before going any further, I should explain to him the conclusions to which my reading and reflections so far had led me, and my notion of what I considered to be the end and object of my existence. I therefore had some luncheon in my own room, and without

going through the farce of taking my sketch-book, strolled down to the rocks, upon one of which I perceived him seated, gazing pensively seaward. So absorbed was he in meditation, that he was not aware of my proximity till I spoke to him.

“My darling! how you startled me!” he exclaimed, jumping off his perch with pleased surprise. “If I had not been thinking about you so deeply I should have heard you. What an agony of suspense I have been in since yesterday! and now,” he said, looking at me eagerly, “the expression on your face tells me nothing to inspire hope.”

“I do not mean it should,” I answered calmly, but I felt such a strange tightening across the chest that speech became an effort. “Mamma is absolutely and firmly opposed to my entertaining any proposal from you, and will listen to no argument on the subject, so it is useless your recurring to it, either with her or me. I am bound to obey her wishes in the matter; but even if I were not, I should have other things to say to you before I could arrive at a decision. I think it right to tell you this, lest you should imagine from what passed yesterday, that, putting

me out of the question, I had no difficulties in my own mind to encounter."

The intensity of the effort which this speech caused me, imparted a harshness to it that I could not have avoided without bursting into tears; and now, when I saw what suffering it produced, the trial of nerve was in no degree lessened. My knees were trembling, and my heart was beating so violently, that it suddenly occurred to me to try and restore the moral balance by a little physical pain. Under this impulse I leant my whole weight upon my hand, which rested upon an edge of rock. The ragged point was so sharp that it cut me deeply, and under other circumstances I should have been unable to restrain an exclamation of pain. As it was, it acted like a sedative. The effect of physical pain and moral suffering on each other is very curious. First, I have a disagreeable duty to perform, and the moral effort gives me a physically painful constriction of the chest; then I hurt myself by cutting my hand on a rock, and feel morally strengthened, and therefore physically relieved. I suppose these are very crude reflections, and that it is perfectly well known by science exactly what physical

pain and what moral suffering are, and where they originate. Of course I did not make them at the moment; but the impulse under which I acted proved a sound one, for Ronald was so taken up bandaging my hand, which was bleeding freely, that we were both able to talk more calmly afterwards.

“I can understand your mother’s objection,” he said; “with her it is probably merely a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence: but I don’t understand why, if she had consented, you would still have required time for reflection.”

“I should have required to know more of your character, your aims in life, and your aspirations,” I answered; “and I should also have needed some more information than I now possess as to your views in regard to those deep and mysterious problems which have ever agitated the bosom of humanity, as it is of the utmost importance that two people who propose to pass their lives together should be in entire sympathy upon subjects so vital.”

I thought it best to come to the point at once, for I was quite prepared to assert my rights as a girl who would soon be a woman, and in a position to defy the maternal authority, if I found

him thoroughly satisfactory and sympathetic. An amused smile passed over his countenance as I made this innocent, and, as it seemed to me, very pertinent observation.

“Have you solved the problems of which you speak?” he said.

I had in my pocket notes for an essay which I was engaged in writing on “The Anomalies of Civilised Existence, as Tested by Intuitive Aspirations in Ideal Life,” but I was afraid of boring him by reading them to him; so I explained to him shortly, that though my experience of life had been brief, I had lived long enough to discover that the popular theology, so far as its practical social working was concerned, failed to satisfy my religious instinct, and that I had therefore determined to adopt a method of moral research which, so far as my investigation went, had not been attempted, even by the most eminent reformers of ancient or modern times. Those who endeavoured to inculcate a new religious idea, if it had any connection with another world or a future life, had always started with the assumption of an inspiration which it was impossible rationally to verify, and which contained the new moral

truths that they offered to the world for its guidance and salvation ; while, if it had no such connection with the unknown, it became a cold system of philosophy—as, for instance, those of Confucius and Plato, or Comte—which had never been acceptable to the masses, because they appealed so much more to the intellect than the affections. In other words, the attempt of reformers and philosophers hitherto had been invariably to endeavour to construct the life out of the religion, instead of the religion out of the life, by either an act of faith or an effort of intellect out of practical experiment.

“Then,” said Ronald, delightedly, “we agree entirely, and sympathise thoroughly. We neither of us know anything, or believe anything—in other words, we are both agnostics.”

He had no sooner made this remark than I felt that all was at an end between us. It was evident, that if he could so little understand my principle of thought, after the clear explanation I had offered him, as to confound it with agnosticism, the very foundations of mutual sympathy were wanting. I thought, however, that it was only due to him to explain this ; so I observed that I was so very far from being an

agnostic, that I could only account for his supposing me to be one on the hypothesis of a weakness of intellect on my part; and I left him to infer that, in my opinion, it included one on his.

“On the contrary,” he replied, “it is considered an evidence of advanced and enlightened thought. How can we know anything more of ourselves than that we are phenomena? And since we are nothing but phenomena, how can there be anything else that isn’t a phenomenon? Everything in the universe, and outside of it—if there is anything outside of it—must be all of one piece.”

“How,” I said, “knowing nothing, and having no means of knowing anything, do you know that you are a phenomenon? And what is a phenomenon? If you start on the assumption that you know nothing, argument becomes impossible; if you assert that you know anything, you are not an agnostic.”

“Pardon me,” he replied; “I know that both you and I exist, but it is impossible for me to know anything as to the cause or nature of our existence.”

“That last assertion is assuming a good deal of knowledge for one who knows nothing. Pray,

do you consider love a phenomenon in regard to the nature and cause of which you know nothing?"

"Ah, it is the most extraordinary and inexplicable of all phenomena, darling, for you: I know that it exists, so far as I am concerned, —why should I care to know more?"

"Because, without knowing more, it is evident that we should both make a mess of it," replied I, somewhat brusquely. "I for one believe that all phenomena, as you call them, are governed by law. How do you account for the world going round the sun?"

"Just as I account for my coming to meet you to-day—by the phenomena, not the law, of attraction."

"Well," I said—for a certain flippancy of presumption in his manner of dealing with so momentous a subject offended me—"it has produced in me the sensation of repulsion, and I am the less distressed at it because you know that it is impossible for you to discover the cause of it. It is a simple phenomenon which will not bear discussion; it exists, that is all either of us knows; further investigation is hopeless. We met, we were both attracted, we

exchanged a few ideas ; you remained attracted, while I was repelled. Curiously enough, while I am attracting you, and you are repelling me, we both suffer, and shall continue to do so until a new series of phenomena occur. That, I think, is the history of our little romance, looked at from an agnostic point of view." I concluded bitterly, and felt a suspicious desire to blow my nose, which a false pride prevented my doing at the moment, while my eyes were so full of tears that I scarcely dared to wink them. As far as I could analyse my feelings at the time, this emotion was not the result of any noble or tender sentiment, but of sheer vexation and disappointment.

At this critical moment a step on the shingle arrested our attention, and turning round I saw a large and somewhat ungainly man, dressed in an exaggerated tourist costume of checks and knickerbockers, whom I at once divined to be no less a person than the Baron himself. "Ah," thought I, "he has been telegraphed for." Mamma evidently began to suspect something some days ago. She must consider the matter serious. I had no idea I was growing into such an important personage.

As he approached he stretched out his arms as though he expected me to rush into them, and his face seemed to beam with affectionate eagerness. "Ah, my little Ora!" he called out,—he had adopted the last syllable of my name as a pet appellation, preferring it to Alty, which was the only other alternative; my mother never condescended to abbreviate it,—“have I found you at last, hidden away among the rocks like a sea-gull, my picturesque beauty?” and he folded me slowly in his elephantine embrace. “And my good friend MacAlpine, how well you are looking! but who would not, in that grand costume? Ah, how I envy you Highlanders! what traditions, what poetry, what romance!” and after shaking hands with him, he drew back to give him the full benefit of his admiring gaze. He had only seen Mr MacAlpine once before, but this was too good an opportunity of plunging into familiarity with the brother of a peer to be neglected.

“You are both surprised to see me, no doubt, but, as the French say, there is nothing certain but the unexpected. Murkle telegraphs me from Paris that my presence is required there without delay on business the most important.

You have perhaps heard of the nature and extent of our operations, MacAlpine. Everything on these occasions depends upon promptitude of action; but I cannot sever myself from my domestic treasures. Wealth, life itself, is valueless, unless shared by those we love. Is it not so, *ma cherie*? What pleasures sacrifices become under such circumstances! How delightful was my journey rendered by the anticipation of meeting my wife and daughter!—though we have not been so long separated.”

“When are we to start, Baron?” I asked, anxious to put an end to the torrent which I knew by experience would flow without interruption till we reached the house. I never would call him “papa,” though he had repeatedly urged me to do so; but I felt that the sacred name must not be so profaned.

“I can only allow you one day for packing, Puss. You know how expert your mother has become by long practice in these sudden moves. And you, MacAlpine—when shall you tear yourself away from your native heath?”

“I don’t know,” said Ronald, gloomily, who was evidently a good deal depressed by this second blow to all his hopes. The difficulties I

had created he evidently had not thought serious, but the prospect of having to part finally from me now rather overcame him.

“He is an agnostic, and does not know anything,” I added maliciously, for I was still smarting under a certain self-satisfied presumption he had shown in our argument.

“*Parbleu!*” said the Baron. “An agnostic in a kilt—what an odd combination! Now if you had said an æsthete, I could have understood. Is a kilt æsthetic, Ora? You understand art, and ought to know. Why should we not seek to adapt the habits and costumes of our ancestors to the thoughts and tendencies of the day? Why is an agnostic in a kilt more incongruous than a financier in knickerbockers?” and he looked down complacently on his own. “What knight-errant was it who, in the days of chivalry, used to wear a sun-flower as his badge? He may have been an æsthete.”

Here the Baron’s breath was providentially checked by the steepness of the cliff up which we had begun to climb, and at the top of it we stopped to rest and give Ronald an opportunity of bidding me a last farewell. I saw the Baron eyeing us narrowly as he did so, so I gave him

no clue to my feelings by my manner ; and we strolled on leisurely, he volubly expatiating on his activity and devotion to his family and his affairs, and I scarcely listening—ruthlessly scattering to the winds the seeds of that affection which for the first time in my life had just begun to sprout, for an object that had proved unworthy.

So ends the history of my first delusion. I wonder whether the experience of my life is to be that it is made up of them—whether the satisfaction which most people seem to derive from existence, arises from the fact that they live on the surface, and don't dig deep enough to find that it is made up of illusions. That the financial operations of the Baron and Mr Murkle are, has long become clear to me ; that the social ambitions of my mother are, is no less evident. All the three individuals with whom my life is most closely associated are pursuing shadows, and they persist in dragging me with them. Next year I am to be launched upon the society of London, and no pains are to be spared to make me a success—in other words, to make me another illusion ; that is what it comes to. The only things that seem to me real are pov-

erty, sickness—suffering of all sorts. I am strongly inclined to think that if you go deep enough, everything else is sham. But perhaps that is only because I am young, and my experience of life so far has had a tendency to make me morbid. There must surely be another side to the medal; and on that hypothesis, I solemnly dedicate my life to its discovery.

CHAPTER III.

THE CALIFORNIANS.

IN the *entresol* of one of the most recent and spacious constructions of Haussmann, near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, sat two young ladies of the type which has ceased to produce the astonishment among Parisians that greeted its first appearance, and has become of late not only recognised, but rather the *mode* than otherwise. They had evidently just arrived; for the room still bore traces of the litter of unpacking, and an angular, middle-aged woman, with severe lines about the corners of her mouth, and a long thin nose with a bridge like a razor, was performing the process usually known as "tidying up."

"My sakes!" she said, pausing for an instant in her occupation to look out of the window.

“Where air all them carriages a-driving to? If so many people want to go along that road,” she went on, looking contemptuously down the Champs Elysées, “I wonder why they don’t have a car-track along it! On Sunday, too! Why, they can’t be all a-going to church—can they, my dear? They are all a-going the same way,” and she sank her voice apologetically, as though fearing she might have done the gay crowd which was then streaming out to the Bois, a wrong.

“Oh you silly innocent old Hannah! What fun it will be completing your education and teaching your antiquated idea how to shoot! Why, that is called the *beau monde*, going out for a drive in the Bois.”

“Oh, the bo mawnd, is it? And what’s the Bwa? They do seem in an awful hurry to get there. Now, from the looks of them men”—and she gazed critically at the occupants of the roof of a four-in-hand—“if that’s what they are on a Sunday, I guess there ain’t much to ’em on a week-day. You don’t tell me that you’ve come all the way from Californy to find husbands among them chaps?”

“Now, Hannah, you mustn’t talk so disrespect-

fully of the male sex because you happen to be an old maid. And we haven't come across the Atlantic to find husbands at all, but to amuse ourselves and inform our minds; and we've brought you—you faithful old thing!—to take care of us, and see we don't get into mischief. And you needn't think it necessary to go about dusting every hole and corner any more, but leave that to the French servants. And now you had much better go and rest yourself, and leave us to our own devices,—only don't forget that I am Stella and Stella's me." At which somewhat enigmatical absurdity both the young ladies burst into a fit of hearty laughter, and the old one smiled with a grim knowingness as she left the room.

"Oh, Mattie, what a joke it will be, trifling with all their budding, *blasé*, or blighted affections, as the case may be!" And the two girls walked to the window and looked out upon the victims they intended to sacrifice with a calm confidence which, considering they had only reached Paris early that morning for the first time in their lives, proved they were not novices in the description of warfare they proposed to enter upon in the Old World. One of them was

tall, graceful, and strikingly handsome. It was not she who had made the last remark, however, betokening so much certainty of their power for mischief, but her companion, who was a good deal shorter, and who made up for her want of looks—for her features were irregular and rather plain—by the extreme brilliancy of her eyes, and the intelligence and mobility of expression.

“I wonder that Keith has not come to see us yet,” said the tall one. “I sent round the first thing to tell him we’d arrived.”

“What kind of a man is he, anyhow?” asked her friend.

“That’s just what I want to know. I saw his photograph once—dreamy blue eye, tawny moustache, plenty of biceps, languid, drawling, aw-aw kind of person, I should judge. The hero of the period, you know—pretends to have brains, but to be too lazy to look for them, which is a capital way of concealing their absence. I shall call him Keith right away, and if he’s got any sense he’ll offer to kiss me. It would be only natural, as his mother was my aunt. She married an *attaché*, or a secretary, or a consul, or something connected with English diplomacy at Washington. There he had become a minister

and an ambassador, or something of that sort, and my aunt became Lady Hetherington, and then they both died, leaving some sons and daughters. I never saw any of them, of course, as I was born in California; and I never expected to, till you asked me to come to Europe with you to see life and make acquaintance with my English cousins. What a first-rate idea that was! Oh, I quite forgot," said the girl, suddenly interrupting herself. "My! why, it's you he's got to kiss!"

"Well, I don't think the tawny moustache will much mind making the mistake; still, for the sake of appearances, we ought to decide before he comes which is his cousin. It would not do to give him a bad impression of her at the outset. Now, shall we take him into our confidence, or are we to change places and names at once? am I henceforth during our stay in Europe to be Mattie Terrill, and are you to be Stella Walton? Because, if so, you must post me up thoroughly about the late ambassador and your aunt and cousins."

"Oh, that don't matter," laughed her friend, whom we must henceforth call Stella. "We'll put it all down to Western ignorance. What

are benighted beings on the Pacific slope expected to know about their English cousins? You can be as ignorant as you like. Won't it be a joke? I do hope he'll turn out a nice fellow, and that you'll fall in love with him, Mattie. We'd all three stay in Europe and have splendid times. Mind you begin by calling him Keith. The only important thing you've got to recollect is that you're a pauper. Left very badly off, poor thing, in consequence of that terrible crash in mining-stocks, which ruined your poor pa; and I must never forget that I am the heiress, the lovely Bonanza, the fairy princess of nuggets, the celebrated Stella Walton."

"Wasn't it lucky," said her friend, "that the moment I became an heiress I was said to be beautiful; and that Cedar Buttes was such an out-of-the-way place, that it's a thousand to one if we meet any one we ever saw before? and if we do, we must swear them to secrecy. I guess the celebrated Californian heiress and her friend will play such a trick on old Europe as will astonish its gilded youth and its match-making mammas; while it will save me from the dilemma of never knowing whether the impecunious European grandees whom I captivate want

to marry me for myself or my money. Oh, Stella, I shall so enjoy seeing them all at your feet. Only remember dear, they'll all be making love to you for *my* money, so don't go and lose your heart to any of them. "There he is," she exclaimed, as a ring at the bell announced a visitor.

Excepting that he had a long fair moustache, and may possibly have possessed biceps (for he was a well-made man of six feet), the photograph had evidently conveyed an entirely wrong impression of her cousin to Stella. His eye was anything but dreamy, and there were depths in its dark blue which, so far from denoting the absence of brains, suggested that they were present in an unusual degree. Moreover, there was nothing either languid in his manner or drawling in his speech, and he approached the girls with a frank cordiality which they were not slow to perceive and reciprocate.

"I am Mattie Terrill, Cousin Keith," said the shorter girl, with a charming air of innocence, "and this is my bosom friend, Stella Walton, the great Californian heiress, you know. How kind of you to answer my letter so promptly! I thought I might venture so far on our relationship."

“I should never have forgiven you if you had been a day in Paris without letting me know,” said Keith. “You must consider me while you are here as absolutely devoted to your service. I suppose you are not alone, Mattie. You don’t mind my calling you Mattie?”

“Why, of course not. How do you mean about our not being alone? I guess we are old enough to take care of ourselves. There’s Hannah, to be sure, but she hardly counts.”

Mr Hetherington looked rather embarrassed and turned to her companion, who, while this dialogue was going on, had sat demurely silent.

“We’re both orphans, you know, Mr Hetherington,” she now observed, “but are not the less able to protect each other. Besides, if the men get very dangerous, we can always take refuge in flight. I confess I rather hoped that we might enlist you as our knight-errant.” And as she glanced at him confidingly, Hetherington thought he had never seen such lovely long eyelashes.

“Oh, there is no real danger,” he answered, laughingly; “I was thinking of the proprieties. Paris, you know, which is the least proper city in the world, is the most particular about these,—perhaps that is the reason. I wanted your whole

party to come and dine with me to-night at Bignon's, and I did not know how many it consisted of; and then, if you don't mind its being Sunday, we could go to the theatre afterwards. Would you kindly tell me," he added, somewhat shyly, "who Hannah is? Perhaps we might take her too."

"I am afraid Hannah would not understand French notions of propriety; for she would think it horribly improper to go to the theatre on Sunday, and does not think it at all improper our travelling alone," said Mattie. "We brought Hannah with us as an antique, to give us a sort of air of respectability and impose upon foreigners, but not to participate in our amusements, which she would not enjoy, or to act as a restraint upon us, except when we asked her to. We thought she might be useful in case of sickness; and as the dear old thing has no one to care for her at home, and is very poor, and has known me ever since I was a child, I told her to come along. She's the daughter of a Methodist minister, and taught school,—in the primaries, of course, because she only had a third-grade certificate; so her grammar is faulty. For all that, she knows a good deal more than you or me; but

I think she would be a sort of fifth wheel to the coach to-night, even if she would come."

"Then it is agreed," said Hetherington. "I will call for you with the fourth wheel, who is a friend I am living with, this evening, and we shall make a *partie carrée*. I am sure you will like Bob Alderney, Mattie."

"If he is half as nice as you are, Keith, I am sure I shall," responded Mattie, with a frank laugh. "I predict we are going to have a lovely time in Paris; and then we'll all go to London for the season."

"Oh, Mattie," burst out Stella, when the door had closed on Hetherington, "why, he is perfectly splendid! Not a bit like what I expected. I am real jealous to think that he imagines you his cousin all the time. I was quite afraid he would give you a brotherly salute when he went away. What voices these Englishmen have!—so melodious, ain't they? And how nicely his clothes do sit! If his friend Bob Alderney is only up to the same notch, what a pair of beaux we shall have! This," she said as she rose and struck a melodramatic attitude in the middle of the room, "surpasses my most sanguine expectations."

True to time Hetherington appeared with his

friend, who was about three inches shorter than himself, with a black beard and an eyeglass, both in evening costume, — a fact evidently gratifying to the young ladies. They each carried bouquets.

“I must tell you,” said Hetherington, after introducing his friend, as he presented his bouquet to Stella, “that it is not the custom in Paris for young men to make presents of bouquets to young ladies as it is in America; but we thought you might have neglected to provide yourselves with any. So far as we are concerned, you may always rely upon us,—mayn’t they, Bob? only don’t do so in the case of others.”

Stella, who in her capacity of heiress, wore Mattie’s jewels, and was otherwise most becomingly attired, looked so radiantly bewitching as her eyes sparkled with the excitement of anticipation, that poor Bob was almost too dazzled to reply with a promptitude befitting the occasion. In fact, he was only recalled to duty by Mattie saying, “Is that lovely bouquet really for me, Mr Alderney?” upon which that gentleman rapidly dropped his eyeglass and stammered an apology as he handed it to her in such confusion that she laughed and said, “Ah, I see, as Mr

Hetherington says, it is not the custom, but you'll soon get used to it. How do you propose going, Mr Hetherington? It's too far to walk."

"Yes, but I have two *coupés* at the door; if you will get into one with Bob, I will take Stella with me."

Most of us are too familiar with Paris to realise the first impression which its afternoon and evening life, bubbling over into the boulevards from the *cafés*, is calculated to produce; but Hetherington and Alderney had the full benefit of the original observations and gushing spontaneity of their two companions, whose experience of life thus far had been limited to San Francisco and Virginia city, and to whom the novelty and excitement of thus independently launching themselves upon the glittering surface of Parisian existence produced a brilliant gaiety, which seemed irresistibly fascinating to the young men, accustomed to the more reserved and languid beauties of their own society.

It was difficult to say which was the more sparkling, the Moselle or the conversation, at that never-to-be-forgotten first dinner at Bignon's, at the end of which Stella had decided that, as a distant cousin of hers had married a distant

cousin of Mattie's, they were all cousins together, and it was ridiculous for her to call Keith Mr Hetherington, especially as they were likely to be so much together; and that, if they began calling each other by their Christian names at once, it would be a protection to all, and be much less particular than if they put it off until later. And Bob Alderney looked so miserable at being left out in the cold, and pleaded so hard to be considered somebody's cousin, and have the same protection thrown over him, and protested so eloquently that he was quite as much a cousin to Keith as Stella was a cousin to Mattie, and that distinctions of this sort were invidious and harm might come of them, that it was decided that he should be included, as no one need know that they had not been intimate from their childhood.

The Gymnase did not contain a merrier party than the four who comfortably filled the box which Hetherington had secured; and the attention of the girls was equally divided between what was going on on the stage and the dresses of the ladies; while the beauty of Stella Walton was creating an evident sensation, and during the *entr'acte* a whole battery of *lorgnettes* was

opened upon her from the stalls, without, however, in the smallest degree ruffling her self-possession.

“That fellow ought to know Stella again when he sees her,” whispered Alderney to his friend, availing himself of his newly acquired privilege. “He has never taken his eyes, or rather his glasses, off her since the curtain rose. See, he is waving his hand to you;” and Hetherington saw a tall, dark, handsome man, with raven hair, a hooked nose, a curled moustache, and a lithe figure, a flower in his button-hole, and a large expanse of shirt-front under his white tie, nodding to him familiarly.

“It’s Murkle, the great contractor and financier. I met him several times in Florence, but I didn’t know I was so intimate with him as he seems to be with me. I believe he has just got into Parliament. See, he’s making signs.”

“He wants you to go and meet him in the *foyer*,” said Alderney. “Let’s go; if what the world says of him is true, he has brass enough to come here, and perhaps that would be awkward.”

“The probability is,” answered Hetherington, “that his object in wanting me to meet him in the *foyer* is to ask to be presented to the ladies, and it really is compromising. He is probably

quite under a mistake as to who our companions are. This comes of introducing American manners into Paris."

"Perhaps the young ladies themselves will be the best judges as to what ought to be done."

"What are you two whispering about instead of amusing us?" interrupted Stella at this moment. "You don't mean to say that you have a secret into which we are not to be admitted? Who is that enormously fat man, with a blue sash across his shirt-front—and what's that thing like a cheese-plate on his chest?—leaning over that equally fat white-powdered woman with the bare shoulders, and the diamond necklace, and the double chin? There! she's just rapped him on the knuckles with her fan, and he seems to be kissing the place to make it well. What a comical old pair! They can't be courting at their time of life, and they can't be married. Yet it's for all the world like some sort of love-making."

"It is love-making of a particular kind," said Hetherington. "He is a celebrated foreign ambassador, and the star on his breast is a decoration; and she is Madame la Comtesse Polischimoff, a female Russian diplomatist, and she is

pretending to make love to him in order to find out the secrets of his Government, and he is pretending to make love to her to find out the secrets of hers. The love part of it, like the purity of her complexion, is all sham; but I want to ask your advice." And Hetherington went on to tell her of the celebrated financier, who had by this time disappeared from the stalls, and whose knock he was in momentary dread of hearing at the door of the box.

"Oh, go and bring him in by all means," said Mattie. "What fun!—we'll make him put us into some good things. If there is a thing I understand, it is finance. Don't tell him yet that one of us is an heiress,—we will let that sublime fact dawn upon his enterprising mind by degrees. He'll be sure to want funds for something that wants floating, and is sure to make all our fortunes, and then we'll throw our gaudy fly,—won't we, Stella? Oh, he'll rise to you, never fear. And mind, we are all cousins," she added, as Hetherington was leaving the box. He met Murkle before he had taken many steps along the corridor, who greeted him with easy familiarity.

"Ah, Hetherington, I was delighted to see you

again, especially in such good company, that upon my soul I could not resist coming to ask if I might be permitted to share it. I had no idea you went in for that sort of thing. Rumour has it that you are above all such weakness; but human nature—human nature—we are all mortal; but I give you my word, between friends, I am the soul of honour in these affairs.”

“You are quite under a mistake,” said Hetherington, rather stiffly; “the ladies I am with in the box are cousins of mine, who have just arrived from America; and as the old lady of the party was unwell”—confound it! he thought, I wonder what old Hannah’s surname is, and whether we could not convert her into an aunt—“I did not like to disappoint them, the more especially as Mr Alderney, to whom I will introduce you presently, is—ahem—also a sort of connection. I am sure they will be delighted to make your acquaintance;” and he ushered Murkle into the box, whose manner changed considerably at the frigid and stately reception he met with. There was a calm hardihood in the manner of both these young ladies when they scented the least suspicion of danger, that did credit to the early training of Cedar Buttes—a certain under-

lying contempt for the male sex as an inferior order of creation, who might understand the use of pick-axes for the extraction of ore, but was a poor defenceless creature when it came to defending itself against the poisoned arrows of their blow-pipes. Mr Murkle felt instinctively that he was in the presence of a new specimen, and that he had better tread warily, and above all, politely; so he made haste to lay aside the fashionable swagger with which he had entered, and twisted his opera hat apologetically, as he made his best bow, and asked them when they had arrived in Paris, and how they liked it.

“Pretty well, as far as we’ve got, to use the expressive language of Artemus Ward,” said Stella, glancing slyly at Hetherington and Alderney. “I confess I don’t care much for pleasure, for which this city is so celebrated: I leave that to my cousin Mattie. I interest myself chiefly in stocks, and the fluctuations of the money market.”

Mr Murkle was so utterly taken aback by this sudden revelation of the propensities of the lovely creature he had been gazing at with so much admiration, that he was unable to find an appropriate reply before the curtain rose; and for the rest

of the evening the two girls were so absorbed by the play that he failed to extract anything from them but monosyllables. His curiosity had, however, been so highly excited, and his interest so much aroused by the beauty of one, and the obvious originality, in spite of their silence, of both, that, as he was helping to put them into their shawls when the play was over, he asked, in a most deferential manner, if he might be allowed to call.

“What is the number and name of our street, Keith?” said Stella; “I never can remember.”

“The street has had a great many names, and will probably have a good many more,” said Hetherington. “At present it is called ‘Rue du dix-huit Mars, dix-huit cent soixante et onze,’ in memory of the first day of the Commune; and the number is ‘Quatre-vingt dix-huit.’”

“Goodness!” said Mattie; “who is ever to remember all these dix-huits? It’s worse than the numbers along Fifth Avenue in New York.”

“How very strange!” exclaimed Murkle: “on what floor, may I ask? Some of my most intimate friends have taken the *premier* in the same house, and arrive to-morrow.”

“Then I do hope they ain’t noisy,” said Mattie,

“for they are just above us ; we’re on the *entresol*, I think it is called. Now we really must hurry up, or old Hannah will think we’re lost. Come, Keith, you and I will go together this time for a change, and send Bob and Stella in the other *coupé*. Good-night, Mr Murkle ; we shall always be glad to see you.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE FINANCIAL TRIUMVIRATE.

GRANDESELLA and Murkle had "places of business" in London, Paris, and Florence. These consisted of two or three large rooms, furnished somewhat more ornately than is usual in such establishments, with a small office, in which there were one or two clerks. It was never certain where they were to be found. There was a great convenience attending this difficulty of unearthing them when they did not wish to be invaded, as the clerk was instructed to say they were abroad, when, in point of fact, they might be in the next room; or Mr Murkle would say that the affair was one which the Baron understood, but to which he had not directed his attention, if it were inconvenient for him to commit himself—and that the Baron was unfortunately in Paris.

And when the visitor was gone, the partners would put their heads together and see what was to be made out of the information which Mr Murkle had extracted. Or if a different impression was to be created, Mr Murkle would lead the visitor with much solemnity into the apartment where the Baron sat in great state engaged in a voluminous correspondence. They had one system for London, and another for Paris, and another for Florence, adapted to the usage of the respective countries; but they had not yet succeeded in establishing themselves socially in London society — their undertakings, so far, having necessitated their residence principally abroad; and although not lacking in boldness of conception or skill in execution, these had not turned out so profitable as had been anticipated, and upon more than one occasion had involved an amount of sharp practice to avert disaster, which had left them with a reputation not altogether untarnished: still they had a reputation, such as it was. They were beginning to be well known as enterprising promoters and skilful operators, and they only needed a great *coup* to have the financial world at their feet. It was in connection with an undertaking which seemed calculated

to realise their most sanguine expectations, that Murkle had now telegraphed for the Baron to join him in Paris; and as the affair was not one which could be concluded in a day, Grandesella had decided upon taking his wife and daughter with him, and had made up his mind to pass the winter there. He was the more inclined to do this, as he had heard from his wife the dangers which threatened to disturb their domestic plans, by the growing intimacy of Ronald MacAlpine and Altiora, and which he determined to nip in the bud. Hence it was that, on the day following the events recorded in the last chapter, the asphalt of the Rue du dix-huit Mars, dix-huit cent soixante et onze, resounded with the clatter of the hoofs which notified the *concierge* of No. Quatre-vingt dix-huit, that Baron Grandesella's family and luggage were on the point of arrival, and brought that domestic functionary to the entrance of the *port-cochère*, cap in hand, and with an air of obsequiousness appropriate to the reception of a financial magnate.

“I don't think much of them port cochers,” said Hannah, who wanted to inspect the new arrivals, and was darning, with the aid of a pair of magnifiers, an open-worked stocking of Stella's

near the window; "they've been and driven right square into the yard. Why, he's never a-goin' to set up a store in this house. I guess he must have chartered a whole car to take all that baggage."

For the next hour, to Hannah's great annoyance, not unmingled with curiosity, there was such a clatter of trunks and porters past the door of the *entresol*, that at last she could stand it no longer, and walked boldly forth on a voyage of discovery, which led her to the landing above, which she passed as if bent on a mission to the upper regions, and then slowly descended, just in time to find Altiora and her maid struggling with a key in the refractory lock of a trunk at the open door of the antechamber. "Bless you, that ain't no good, my dear young lady," she remarked calmly; "it needs being sat upon. Please allow me," and she perched herself coolly on the resisting lid, which still refused to yield to the pressure, and at this juncture Mr Murkle appeared.

"Welcome to Paris, dear Altiora," said that gentleman with a display of affection, which was evidently not reciprocated, as she coldly gave him her hand. "Why, you've got a new maid," he added, turning to inspect Hannah; for Mr

Murkle made it a point to be well informed in regard to the details of the Baron's establishment. But before she could reply, Hannah, who, seated squarely on the box, with short petticoats, and feet an inch from the ground, was giving a spasmodic pressure, proceeding apparently from the base of the spine, broke in—

“Just you come and sit down here alongside of me, and don't talk,” she said, making room for him. “I ain't no new maid, and I wish I warn't an old one. You don't expect to make that key turn by standing staring at me, when just a mite more would do it. One would think the man had never seen a woman a-settin' on a trunk before.”

“Who is this person, Altiora?” said Murkle, angrily; for Altiora's maid had become utterly unable either to grapple with the lock, or to suppress the laughter with which she was inter-nally convulsed.

“I don't know,” said Altiora, “except that she's a very kind one.”

“Why, it's no kindness at all, Miss—only a common neighbourly act, sich as I would expect you to do for me. I think it is for me to ask, who is this man as can leave a lady a-settin' on a trunk, and all but getting it open, and refuses

to come and help her? If that's your grand Paris politeness as they make such a talk about, I say give me 'Murikan manners,'—and she gave a sudden bump of indignation on the lid, which was exactly the “mite” it needed, for the key turned, and she slipped off, and turning to Altiora, before Murkle had time to give vent to his indignation, said “Good day, Miss; my young ladies and me live down on the ‘entersoul,’ I think they call it, and you'll always be welcome;” and she stumped actively off, not a little pleased to think she had made an acquaintance for her young ladies of so promising an appearance.

“Oh,” said Murkle grimly, as he watched her prim upright figure rapidly disappearing, and remembered Hetherington's explanations of the night before,—“so that's the old lady of the party! I don't wonder the young ones dispense with such a *chaperon*, when they go to the theatre alone with young men. You have some neighbours below, Altiora, whom I know slightly, and I think it will be as well for you to let me find out something more about them before you accept this singular female's invitation to make their acquaintance.”

“I should prefer to leave that responsibility to my mother,” said Altiora significantly, as she ushered Murkle into the *salon*, and instantly vanished upon the pretext of telling Madame Grandesella that he had arrived. As she opened the door, the deep bass voice of the Baron gushed through it, singing *Figaro qui, Figaro la*, and he promptly followed it into the room, extending both hands towards Murkle, with his usual manner of excessive cordiality.

“Well, I’m glad it’s ‘*Figaro qui*’ at last; you’ve been running things pretty fine,” said the latter, “leaving me here all alone to answer inquiries, give explanations——”

“And invent lies,” interrupted the Baron. “*Parbleu!* my dear Dick, how could I pay you a higher compliment? What earthly assistance would mine have been to your own brilliant imagination? Besides, I have not been idle. Tell him, *Lalla mia*,” he went on, addressing the Baroness who just then entered the room, “how skilfully I baited the hook with our heiress, who is dying to see her noble cousin, and whose beauty and talents are only equal to her wealth, —*ouf!*” and the Baron gave a grunt as if still fatigued with the labour of the task.

“Lord Sark, it seems, was very suspicious,” said the Baroness, coming to her husband’s relief. “He is, as you know, Altiora’s second cousin, but we have never been able to do more than make him admit the relationship. If we had been a band of Italian brigands, who wanted to capture him and carry him off to our mountains, to hold him for a ransom, he could not have been more wary during all these years. It is fortunate that British brigands exist who can play the same trick by the simple device of making a distinguished nobleman the director of a joint-stock company, limited. Philippo found him in great trouble, dreading liquidation, exposure, and I don’t know what more besides, unless he could find some great capitalists to come to the rescue.”

“And Grandesella and Murkle, with their great financial connection, are going to assume the liability of the company, and save his lordship from disgrace, I suppose,” said Murkle, cynically; “and pray, what are we to get in return?”

“What a gloomy view of things you always take, *mon cher*, before you thoroughly understand them!” said the Baron. “In the first place, I have gone carefully into all the patents pos-

sessed by the Universal Scintillator Company ; and by becoming its possessors, and making a contract disposing of it to the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company, of which you and I, my dear Dick, are the promoters, we can retrieve the ruined fortunes of the one, and float the other, with the Earl of Sark as a sort of aristocratic *trait d'union*. We will entangle him, *mon ami*, in the meshes of our financial net until he is our slave, when we will marry him to Altiora ; and with rank at the helm and beauty at the prow, to borrow the image of the poet, the bark of Grandesella and Murkle will breast the social waves until it is safely moored in the haven, let us say, of royalty,—after that, titles, honours, decorations, political life, and fame. What say you, Sir Richard Murkle, Bart., M.P., G.C.M.G. ?”

“I say,” said Murkle, “that it won't work, for the very simple reason that I intend to marry Altiora myself ; and you know very well, Laura,” he added, turning with a fierce emphasis on the Baroness, “that neither you nor Philippo here, nor Altiora herself, can prevent me. You don't suppose I became a partner in that little arrangement which we entered into eighteen years ago,

when I resigned Laura to you, Philippo, to be dictated to now !”

“Resigned me !” and a glance of very evil meaning shot from the Baroness’s cold grey eye like a poisoned dart, as she turned upon Murkle ; “yes, you resigned me, because I refused you then, as I refuse my daughter to you now. She is not adapted for the *rôle* of a professional beauty, if that is how you mean to advance your fortunes in London,” she went on, with a sneer ; “and even you could not force her to assume it.”

“I think,” replied Murkle, rising, and speaking in a voice of suppressed passion, “the person best able to judge of that matter will be Altiora herself. There is that little mystery so familiar to us all, but of which she has been kept in ignorance, which, when I reveal it to her, as I propose to do at once, will put the matter beyond a doubt.”

“Ta, ta, ta,” interrupted the Baron, drumming his fingers on the table, “don’t be so impetuous, Dick ; and you, Lalla *mia*, don’t aggravate our old friend. If you two can’t be bound by the chords of affection and long association, at least remember that we may all be ruined if you

quarrel. Unity is force ; for my part, I love you both : I never forget that we all hang by the same rope."

"Not yet," said Murkle, and his lip curled with a sinister smile. "I think we had better not discuss how many ropes we may hang by. The subject is not a pleasant one, but I did not start it. I am glad you recognise, Philippo, that you cannot make any plans with regard to Altiora without consulting me first. If you always bear that in mind, there need be no question of hanging."

"*Sapristi!* what a knack you have of raking up unpleasant topics ! How was I to know that you had placed your battered affections upon the girl you've known ever since she was born ? Let me see : as you say, that's more than eighteen years ago now, and the house of Grandesella was an obscure commission agency in an obscure Italian town, and Richard Murkle was an obscure clerk in it then."

"And Laura was an obscure and disconsolate widow, whom I resigned in favour of my obscure employer, upon condition of being made a partner in the firm," interrupted Murkle.

"And who made both your fortunes by the

money she brought with her," added the Baroness, tartly.

"*Basta!*" said the Baron, "let us have no more of this. We none of us could have got on without the other; if we fall out, some honest man, if there is such a thing, will get his rights; you know the old proverb. Let us leave the marriage question and get back to business. I have told Lord Sark that he must come over here and satisfy himself in regard to the terms of the concession, by which he becomes a coproprietor with us of the extensive privileges we have obtained, if he can persuade the board of which he is the chairman, to hand over the company to us at our own terms, which, considering the difficulties they are in, can, I think, be satisfactorily arranged. Of the merits of my project financially, there can be no question, Dick, as you will see when we go into it together; if you don't agree to its advantages matrimonially, we will try another combination. In the meantime, Ora has been most useful as a decoy. She's a young lady with a will of her own, and if you can force her inclinations neither Lalla nor I will interfere;" and he cast a covert glance at his wife, who seemed on the look-out for it, and

who snapped it up so dexterously, that it was undetected by the sharp eyes of Murkle.

“Dear Altiora,” she remarked; “I am afraid she has thrown away her heart upon Mr MacAlpine, and that both Richard and Lord Sark will have some trouble with her.”

Murkle turned an uneasy look of mistrust at the Baroness at this observation. “I won’t trouble you to inform me who Mr MacAlpine is,” he said, “of whom I now hear for the first time, or what the state of Altiora’s affections may be, as I have the girl herself to apply to, and can rely upon her veracity,” and he emphasised the last two words. “Now, Philippo, I am ready to attend to the *exposé* of your project.”

The Baroness, who was accustomed to assist at these deliberations, took up her knitting, and followed the two men as they plunged into the intricacies of those financial combinations—that were afterwards to appear in a very different form in an attractive prospectus—with a subtle apprehension of their mysteries, which could only have been acquired by long practice, from time to time interposing observations, to which both men listened with a respect rarely accorded to the fair sex where such matters are concerned.

The triumvirate protracted the *séance* until even Murkle was convinced that the Earl of Sark and his "company" might be turned to a most profitable account of themselves, if not to his lordship; and under the soothing influence of the delightful prospect thus opened, and the persuasive accents of the Baron, who was an adept in the art of peacemaking, when it suited his purpose, mutual confidence was to all appearance restored, and a tacit understanding arrived at, that nothing was to be gained by anticipating the complications likely to arise when the force of circumstances should compel decided action to be taken with regard to the destiny of the girl, round whom so many interests, both of heart and pocket, seemed likely to centre.

CHAPTER V.

SARK AND "THE CLYMER."

THE Earl of Sark was one of the best known and most popular men in London. When, at the age of three-and-twenty, he had a few years before seconded the Address in the House of Lords, he captured in his first sentence a whole file of peers' daughters, who had obtained seats in the gallery on that occasion. In his second, their mammas began critically to examine him through their eyeglasses, and devise schemes for his capture in the matrimonial net. With the third, he made his first point, and the leader of the Opposition pricked his ears, and felt that a young gladiator had entered the arena, who was likely to give trouble, and prove an inconvenient reinforcement to the enemy. And when he had concluded his fourth, the whole of his own side

burst forth in a well-modulated and guardedly enthusiastic "Hear, hear," which so excited Sark's intimate friend, young St Olave, that that impetuous young nobleman, who had taken his seat for the first time, in an unguarded moment actually clapped his hands, thus, though he instantly checked himself, producing a shiver of dismay throughout the august assembly, from which it did not recover for some moments, and from the effects of which the noble lord on the woolsack suffered until dinner-time. By the time Sark had concluded his brilliant oration, his best friends began to regret bitterly that he should have been thrown away upon the Lords. It was evident that he had the right stuff in him, and he was just the sort of man the party needed sadly in the Lower House. That evening all London, by which I mean all the people who crowded to the three drums between which they oscillated, talked of nothing but Sark's speech; and that nobleman was quite tired of looking modest, and receiving and deprecating compliments, until he staggered off to bed under the weight of his honours, the happiest and most triumphant man in England. It was generally admitted that he was the most eligible

parti of the season. Fairly rich, an earl of ancient lineage, and with an undoubted talent, which should place him in the first rank of the statesmen of his day, he had all the necessary matrimonial requirements,—added to this the secondary considerations, that he was extremely good-looking, of a frank, generous nature, and reported by his contemporaries to have good principles, and we cannot wonder that young ladies, when they saw him approaching in a ball-room, fluttered their fans with a slightly enhanced vigour, arising from nervous agitation, while their cheeks sometimes flushed faintly, and their eyelids drooped timidly—in the case of *débutantes*, aware that the maternal eye was upon them at these trying moments. The more seasoned ones took another line, and carried him off to corners, in mortal dread of his falling a prey to some unprincipled young married woman, who, having made her own game, continued to poach unrestrainedly on the preserves of her younger sisters on promotion. Such, in fact, in spite of all their precautions, actually occurred; and just as the Duchess of Pentonville had flattered herself that her eldest girl, Lady Adeliza, had finally landed him at her

feet, mother and daughter saw him, to their dismay, fairly and apparently irrevocably hooked by "that horrid Mrs Clymer." Mrs Clymer was never called anything else by a certain class of mothers but "that horrid Mrs Clymer." Sometimes the epithet was "disgusting;" but that was only when some tale was narrated, "quite between ourselves, you know, my dear." As a general rule the epithet was thought too strong, as there was no circle, however exalted, in which Mrs Clymer had not achieved success. There had always been a halo of mystery about her, which added immensely to her prestige. You had only to look at her to feel that her life had been a romance. If you were sentimental yourself, she could put on an air which at once touched you—for you felt that she was a woman that had suffered. If you were an artist, you saw by the exquisite taste of her dress that she had a soul which could soar above that baser region of modern æstheticism, into the purer region of a still more sublime conception of what constitutes pure art. If you were horsey, she would give you a lead across country; and if you asked her where she learnt to be at once so daring and so graceful in the hunting-field,

she would fling back her wind-tossed locks recklessly, and tell you "in the Pampas of South America." If you were musical, she had the voice of a siren—and notes which, with a running accompaniment of glances, and "variations" on the feelings, vibrated to your very soul. Her lithe supple figure moved gracefully, without affectation. Her soft white hand possessed a power of thrilling when you clasped it which was simply marvellous—she would have said magnetic. Her little foot, with its high-arched instep, had been immortalised by a sculptor at Rome, and may be seen any day in its nude perfection on the mantelpiece of her perfectly furnished little house in Mayfair—where there is a sanctum to which only intimates are admitted, containing many curious articles of *vertu* and interesting relics, which she keeps as reminiscences of her former life; for Mrs Clymer has lived much and widely. She had only been a season or two in London when she captured Lord Sark, and was then not much over thirty; but she looked a mere girl, and took society by storm by the force of her accomplishments,—her ready wit, her ingenious audacity, her extreme loveliness, and air of ineffable innocence. For

two or three seasons before that she had frequented the watering-places in Europe which are the most affected by the British aristocracy ; and they admitted her freely, because she said she was American. And so she was, so far as nationality was concerned, but Americans denied all knowledge of her in their own country. This she explained by the fact that her father, though a citizen of the United States, had been an officer in the army of some South American republic, where she was born, and that he had subsequently, on the death of his first wife, entered into speculations connected with torpedoes in the Mediterranean, where he had married a Levantine ; and thus she had acquired the knowledge of most European languages, in which she was a proficient, and the fortune which he left her at his death, after having separated from his second wife. But all these details are hazy and obscure, and subject to modification, as they are a sort of patchwork result from scraps of information, extracted at various times by different people. There was another history, quite different, which begins in the Levant, with a good deal of Italy thrown in, and ends with South America. Probably, if anybody had ever seen

Mr Clymer, that gentleman could have thrown some important light on the whole matter: Mr Clymer was the individual with whom so much mysterious suffering was connected. He seemed to have behaved badly on some occasion in Asia Minor; but the subject was evidently so painful, that no one was heartless enough to press for information. He had married her for her fortune, of which, however, she seemed to have saved a good deal, and then ill-treated her, or deserted her, or deceived her. He, too, was said to be an American, and was supposed to be living, if he was living at all, in California; but Mrs Clymer so plainly gave it to be understood that any reference to this mythical individual was painful to her, that society readily conceded it was nobody's business but Mrs Clymer's. There was nothing American about her, at all events. She was thoroughly cosmopolitan—indeed, so much, that she and the American Minister have never been good friends since the celebrated occasion when he made a difficulty about her presentation at Court. Mrs Clymer was not a woman to be baffled, and eventually carried the day, and has taken her revenge ever since by holding up her own countrymen and

countrywomen to ridicule upon every possible occasion. What gives Mrs Clymer her great hold on London society is the hypothetical existence of Mr Clymer; she is just enough married to be a safe person to fall in love with. There can be no possible danger of having to marry her, "because of Clymer, you know." Match-making mammas became anxious to verify the fact of Clymer's non-existence; because, if Mrs Clymer was either a widow, or had never been married—and conjecture, in regard to her, stuck at nothing—then if they could marry her to some weak-minded nobleman, and be done with her, it would be a great riddance of a matrimonial obstacle. Moreover, the more widespread and well founded the suspicion of Clymer's non-existence became, the more likely were lovers to become demoralised for fear of possible consequences. When Sark fell a victim, society at large uttered a general groan of dismay. The mothers were enraged, the daughters dejected, the politicians nervous and disappointed. "That woman Clymer will be the ruin of Sark," said Lord Basinghall; "he has utterly given up all interest in 'The Foot-and-Mouth Disease Bill' ever since she got hold of him. They say that

story of her having a fortune of her own is a pure invention ; that she is in debt for the rent of her house, and for everything there is in it ; that it has all been lent her on speculation by some enterprising usurer, and now that Sark is paying all her debts with interest. His infatuation is something incredible. Not but that she is as handsome as a Peri, and as innocent-looking."

" They say he was offered office the other day, and refused it—couldn't spare the time. Talks of taking Mrs Clymer a cruise round the world in his yacht, with Hurst and Lady Dolly to do proper. I never knew a woman go to the bad so fast as Lady Dolly has, since she has become the *amie intime* of the Clymer," added Lysper, a young Guardsman, who had been making furious love to Mrs Clymer until Sark's appearance on the scene had rendered any further pursuit hopeless.

" I have been trying to persuade Sark to give up that idea," said Lord St Olave mournfully, " and I think I have succeeded. He says he must do something to economise. I hear he lost a lot on the Ascot Cup day. I never knew him bet before ; but it seems that woman made it a test of his affection to back some horse she has an interest in. I believe she is a professional

gambler, and goes in for a lot of speculations on the sly, in spite of all her demure ways."

"I know she dabbles in City things," said Lysper. "I used constantly to meet a stock-broking cad at her house, who used to worship at that shrine when I was amusing myself there; and there was always a mysterious whisper before he took his departure, which I am sure meant business of some sort."

"Say rather mischief," said Basinghall. "Poor Sark! It is really heartbreaking to think what a loss he is to the party. It is like the measles, and must run its course; it's impossible to do anything to save him now, he's too far gone."

So it happened that Lord Sark's finances, becoming embarrassed under the influence of the fair adventuress, he plunged into City speculations, with the aid of the young stockbroker above mentioned, to retrieve them, having much faith in that gentleman's experience and Mrs Clymer's sagacity—a confidence which turned out to be quite misplaced; and he was just in the agonies of the financial dilemma alluded to by Baron Grandesella when that astute financier proposed to rescue him if he would pay a visit to Paris to be enlightened as to certain combinations

by which he was to become part proprietor of the concessions obtained by the promoters of the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company, and derive immense profits as chairman of that company, when it had been successfully floated upon a confiding public. Sark felt rather nervous when he had decided upon this step without first consulting Mrs Clymer, and broke it to that lady with a degree of trepidation which turned out to have been unnecessary. She was just in the humour for a trip to Paris, she said. The London season was still in the distance, and the idea of new financial combinations charmed her almost as much as the prospect of renewing her toilet at Sark's expense, and her intimacy with her old friend Worth, who, it was said, or rather she said, had from time to time been indebted to her for some of his best ideas ; and she assured Sark he allowed her a heavy discount in consequence. They did not, however, come over by the same train, or even go to the same hotel—for though their relations were tolerably notorious, they still respected the external proprieties ; indeed Mrs Clymer had discovered that her intimacy with so distinguished a nobleman, so far from injuring her position in London society, had dis-

tinctly the effect of consolidating it. Many country houses were now open to her, because Sark was almost certain to refuse unless "that horrid Mrs Clymer" was asked—he was such a charming social addition; so, for the matter of that, was she. And as they both made a point of exerting themselves to the utmost under these circumstances, it cannot be denied that their presence contributed largely to the success of these rural aristocratic gatherings. Moreover, there was a certain relief in finding that Mrs Clymer was provided for, even at so great a sacrifice; and she no longer was pronounced so "horrid," now that she had given up "flirting all over the place," as Lysper elegantly expressed it. Though neither the Grandesellas nor Murkle had ever seen her, they were familiar with her photograph in the shop-windows, and with her reputation in the social weeklies; and were too conversant with the weaknesses of human nature to suppose for a moment that she would allow Lord Sark to come to Paris alone. Though her name had not been mentioned in the discussion which had taken place about Altiora, it had been present in the minds of all three; and they all saw in her a possible ally, whose merits they were too divided in

sentiment at that moment to discuss. The Baron thought that when it came to the point she could be bought off—he had an unbounded belief in the power of money; the Baroness saw in her a trump-card, which might be played with advantage when she took her hand in the social rubber of her first London season; and Murkle saw a dangerous rival to Altiora in Sark's affections, whose jealousy he would not be slow to excite if necessary. It was to this hornet's nest that the unconscious Sark glided at the rate of thirty miles an hour in the train which conveyed him from Boulogne to Paris.

It would be instructive but tedious, as most instructive things are, if I were to attempt to describe the intricacies of the financial net in which the Paris triumvirate entangled Sark, by means of a dexterous combination of the two companies in whose fortunes he was destined to become so deeply involved. The process was rapid and skilfully managed. For the first two or three days Grandesella and Murkle saw him alone; then, when he was sufficiently muddled by the jargon of financial detail, and dazzled by prospective results, they descended to the topics and necessities of everyday life, of which

eating is one of the most essential, and Sark was in due time committed to a dinner with the Baroness and Altiora, which he returned by another at the Café Anglais, at which the whole party met Mrs Clymer, who said she always came to Paris at this season, and was so delighted to find that she had accidentally so timed her visit as to meet Lord Sark, and expressed her eternal gratitude to the Baron and Baroness for having been the means of bringing him over so opportunely. She seemed instinctively to find in Murkle a kindred spirit, and her voice sank to such a sympathetic cadence, her large eyes beamed upon him so languidly and so confidently, and her cheek flushed so slightly as they exchanged glances for the third time, that Sark, who happened to look up at the moment, felt a twinge of jealousy, and took another survey of Murkle from quite a new point of view. "So my astute financial friend aspires to be a lady-killer," he thought, and then laughed away his suspicion as he felt the Clymer's gaze burning into his soul. He was so accustomed to the sensation that he did not need to look up to know that she was waiting to reassure him by an unuttered language, of which he had learnt to read

every secret. So this dinner, which was only the prelude to many succeeding ones, passed off very well. The only discordant note in the party was Altiora; but as this history could never have been written were it not for the access which I happen to have had to that young lady's own journal, her experiences can best be narrated in her own words.

CHAPTER VI.

ALTIORA CAPTURED BY THE CALIFORNIANS.

AT last the Baron and mamma have achieved the great object of their ambition, and have captured Lord Sark. "Altiora," said mamma, when he called, "let me introduce you to your cousin Lord Sark." I thought his lordship winced slightly, but that may have been imagination—he was too well-bred to show anything but cordiality; but we had no mutual relations to talk about, which made it awkward.

"I have another cousin in Paris," he said at last, with a smile, "whom I must look up. He is quite an oriental pundit, and buries himself in the ancient literature of the Zoroastrians, or some other extinct species. Have you ever met Bob Alderney?"

As I had never even heard of him, I was

obliged to confess my ignorance, and tried to engage Lord Sark in a discussion in regard to the pursuits of this other new-found relative, with whom I may possibly find some interests in common; but I soon became instinctively conscious that I was boring him, or rather that he was boring himself. Neither mamma nor I could discuss London society, nor politics, nor sport; we tried art, but he seemed to know nothing about it. There was left finance, about which I knew mamma was dying to talk to him, but felt that it would not be discreet; and when he alluded to Mr Murkle, I felt sympathetically towards him as a fellow-victim who was to be pounced upon. I shall warn him about this the first time I have an opportunity. It certainly is an anomalous position morally for a girl to find herself in, but I feel that I owe it to the late Mr Peto to be a traitor in the family camp. Dear papa! I am certain he must have been the soul of honour, from the overpowering inclination which possesses me to unearth villany and expose hypocrisy wherever I meet it. I am sure there is a serious side to Sark. He told me always to call him Sark, in an undertone which mamma did not hear. I suppose it is the fashion

between second cousins in the aristocracy. At all events he is worth saving, merely as a human being. He is certainly honest, and has a heart; but I suppose he has what mamma calls "the vices common to young men," whatever these may be. How much I have of life yet to learn before I can make myself of any practical use to others! It is ridiculous to suppose that, because I am a girl, I cannot do good honest service to young men. Pure conventionalism, which I am determined to break through.

.

We have just come home from dining with Sark. He invited an American lady, Mrs Clymer, to meet us. As soon as I touched her hand, I felt a slight shiver and a painful constriction of the chest. The only other person who sometimes affects me in the same way is Richard Murkle, but then the pain is generally in the temples. I wonder how doctors account for this. I suppose they would tell me it is imagination, and did not exist at all; but not only do I know, as a positive fact, that it exists, but I know vaguely what it means. There is something radically wrong about that woman, and she feels that I know it. I was puzzling over the various phenomena she

presented to me, when I suddenly looked up and caught her eye fully before she had time to lower it. For a second all the blood left her face, and then came back with a rush. I suppose blushing and faintness are imagination too, and don't exist at all. If the look of one person at another can produce a flush or a pallor, why may the emotion not be intensified until it is felt as a pain? And if a look can do it, why should not a touch do it still more effectually? What passes from eye to eye to produce this effect may surely pass from hand to hand. It must be a moral force of some kind, "acting" on what the doctors call the nerves. That word "acting" is very convenient. It entirely dispenses with any explanation of how the acting is done, so it is a good deal used by scientific men. It is quite evident, at any rate, that I was "acting" on Mrs Clymer, and Mrs Clymer was "reacting" on me. We did not require to say anything to each other to do this. She was doing a good deal of acting all round. She was acting on Murkle, who is too swarthy to blush, but there is an almost imperceptible twitch in the muscle of his upper lip on these occasions; and she was acting on Sark, who sighed. Neither the Baron nor mamma

seemed to feel her influence in the slightest degree. When we parted, and Mrs Clymer took both my hands in hers and looked lovingly into my eyes with a face of radiant innocence and gushing affection, and said, "Dear Miss Peto, I am so glad to have had this opportunity of making your acquaintance. We have all been so merry to-night, that I have not had a chance of really talking to you, but I feel sure we shall be great friends. You must let me see a great deal of you;"—when she said all this with much effusion, I felt that she was making a deliberate declaration of war to the knife; and she knew I felt it by the warmth with which I returned her pressure, and which seemed quite to please Lord Sark, who said, "Good-bye, Altiora," to my mother's great delight.

Going down-stairs yesterday, I met my elderly friend, who had so much scandalised Mr Murkle by asking him to sit with her on the lid of my trunk. She was standing at the open door of the *entresol*, talking to a beautiful girl who had evidently just come in from a walk. "Why, here's the very young lady herself," she said, holding out her hand to me with the greatest cordiality. "I was just a - sayin' to Mattie—

Stella, I mean," she corrected herself, "as bein' all strangers together in a strange land, and such near neighbours, it was only becoming as we should go and see whether you wasn't feelin' kinder lonely like, with your parpa and mamma out so much." She laid the emphasis on the first syllable of the words papa and mamma, as if I was a lisping infant.

The lady she called Mattie and then Stella blushed slightly as she bowed, and said, "I must apologise for so informal an introduction; but I was just explaining to my friend here that our being strangers and neighbours scarcely warranted our taking the liberty she suggests, though I am very glad"—and she looked at me with such frank, truthful eyes, that my heart warmed to her at once—"of any accident which may give me the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"Well, there ain't no use standing talking out here in the cold, anyway," broke in her companion; "so come in and have a cup of tea. This is Miss Walton—my, now if I didn't as near as anything say Miss Terrill—and Miss Terrill is indoors."

There must have been a good deal of what

the Americans call "personal magnetism" in the old lady, for I yielded unresistingly to her will, explaining to Miss Walton, as I did so, that ever since my first meeting with her friend I had cherished a hope that we might become acquainted.

A girl was sitting reading as we entered the *salon*, and my first friend, who seemed inclined to take all the responsibility of my introduction upon herself, said, "Here, Mattie—laws, now, if I warn't jist a-goin' to say Stella!—here's Miss—I didn't rightly catch your name—come to see you."

"Altiora Peto," I said, laughing.

"Now you mustn't apologise," interrupted Miss Walton, seeing I was going to excuse my abrupt entrance. "This is Mattie Terrill, and this is Hannah Coffin, one of the old New Hampshire Coffins; though she has been a long time away from New England, she has a good deal of the old Puritan ring to her still—haven't you, Hannah?"

But Hannah had no time to reply, for Miss Terrill was expressing her welcome; and in half an hour we were sitting over our tea like old friends.

I confess I was very nervous as to how I should break the fact of my new acquaintances to my mother, who would be sure to treat them with the utmost rudeness if, as was most probable, she did not approve of the whole proceeding; and I was haunted by the vision of an abrupt termination of an intercourse which, from its originality, I was beginning to enjoy immensely. I thought it best to prepare the minds of my new acquaintances for this eventuality, and yet it was a most difficult matter to approach. As I was meditating upon it, Miss Terrill said—

“I think we know a friend of yours—Mr Murkle. He promised to make us acquainted before your arrival.”

This rather astonished me, and led to a whole history of their first visit to the theatre, under the guidance of Miss Terrill’s cousin, Mr Hetherington, and Mr Alderney, who turns out to be none other than my own unseen cousin Bob, first brought to my consciousness by Lord Sark.

“Why, you don’t say!” laughed Miss Terrill, as she clapped her hands, after listening to my explanation,—“then he’s your cousin too, and we’re all cousins! Well, now, ain’t this per-

fectly lovely! This is a new version of 'Our American Cousin,' and we'll call Lord Sark Lord Dundreary."

We had just arrived at this satisfactory conclusion when the *timbre* sounded, and in walked Mr Hetherington and Mr Alderney.

"Mr Alderney," said Miss Walton, her eyes dancing with mischief, "let me introduce to you your cousin, Miss Altiora Peto."

Mr Alderney, who was evidently a shy man, was overcome with embarrassment at being thus unexpectedly brought face to face with an unknown relative, and apparently had a strong suspicion that he was being made the subject of chaff; but he had too much politeness under the circumstances to give vent to it, so he only bowed and murmured something about being too delighted.

"Lady Mary Alderney, who married General Peto, was my grandmother," I said, by way of explanation. "I suppose you know that Lord Sark is in Paris?"

Mr Alderney said that they had exchanged notes but had not met,—and then the conversation became general. I was surprised to find that they all seemed more or less distantly

connected, and called each other by their Christian names, and were evidently on terms of the greatest intimacy, which was the more remarkable, as neither Mr Hetherington nor Mr Alderney had been in America, and this was the first visit of the young ladies to Europe. It was a decided relief to my mind when I discovered that Miss Walton was a great heiress. This would quite reconcile my mother to the irregularity of the circumstances under which I had made their acquaintance, and to the fact that they were travelling without any other *chaperon* than Miss Coffin, who seemed to live with them on terms of perfect equality, though evidently a person who had not enjoyed the same advantages of education and social training as her friends.

There was something so refreshing in the originality and spontaneity of the whole party—in the utter absence of conventionality, and in the genuine warmth of natures not yet chilled by contact with what is called polite society—that I felt myself expanding and reviving under its influence, like a tropical plant rescued from the frost and put into a hothouse. I was just allowing myself the full luxury of the sensation,

when I detected a suppressed sigh, and a whispered "Poor darling!" unheard by the others, who were all talking together, and found Miss Coffin's black eyes, which combined a singular benevolence of expression with a very piercing quality, fixed upon me.

"Guess I've got to kiss you: I don't know what come to me that I did not think of it sooner. You need to be loved, my dearie—that's what's the matter with you," she murmured, as she put her arms round me. "You go on talking, and don't mind us," she said sharply, turning to the others, whose conversation had been suspended by the movement. "Time enough to stare like that," she added, turning to Mr Alderney, who had put his glass in his eye the better to observe her proceedings, "when it comes to your turn." Upon which he dropped it with a blush, and both the girls laughed heartily, and I resigned myself to her ministrations with a sensation of calm content which was entirely new to me; and yet all she did was to sit by my side and hold my hand without speaking, with a fixed dreamy look into my face. "You're a-goin' to have trouble," she said, after a pause; "and if I'm anywhere about when it comes, you come to

old Hannah. I've never been a mother," she added with a sigh, "and I ain't comfortable and fleshy to lean upon; but I've got a mother's heart, my dear, and when I feel a-drawin' to any one like I do to you, it's because I've got a use to 'em somehow. Now it don't seem to me, so far as I can feel, as you ever rightly knew what a mother's love was. Well, well, I've known mother-love kill a mother, same as I've known the want of it to kill a daughter. It all happened in my own family. I had two sisters, my dear, and one of 'em married a man as wasn't of much account, against our mother's will, and mother would never see her again; and she took it to heart so, she died. And the other sister married, and had a daughter as married a mighty rich man; but he was downright bad, and she left him, and she was that proud she never let it be known where she had gone to; and her mother—that's my sister—never could hear of her again; and so she took it to heart, and pined for that daughter till she died. It comes of feelings not being properly divided, my dear. Why on airth do heartless mothers have lovin' daughters, and heartless daughters have lovin' mothers? Well, well, it's all a puzzle."

“I feel that sensitive, my dear,” she continued after a pause, “to people as I feel a-drawin’ to, that I know when they are bein’ starved for love by a chill as catches me all about the heart. It gets to feel cold and withered up like—just as though a lump of ice was in my chest, that was a-meltin’ away and leaving nothing. The way I know who it is as is suffering is because of the sudden love I feel for them, that seems to rush into that cold empty place. That tells me I can do ’em good, and I can feel it sorter comin’ back to me from the person. Now, dearie, you just keep on a-lovin’ me all you have a mind to. Why, old and thin as I am, I’ve got a life in me as will build you right square up.” Then she stopped abruptly, and after a moment added in a sharp tone, which contrasted strangely with the wonderful tenderness of her voice hitherto, “Come into the corner—we’re too near them chattering folks here now;” and she added when we could talk more freely, “I want you to tell me all about your mother.”

Even if I had desired, which I did not, it would have been impossible for me to have resisted the impulse which I felt to take this

stranger into the confidences of my heart. There was such a completeness of comprehension in her sympathy; she seemed to divine my meaning so far beyond what it was possible for me to express in words; her faculty of intuitive perception was so infinitely more acute than anything I had ever met with in any individual before, and so much at variance with the external impression produced by her apparent lack of education and refinement,—that I felt more and more surprised at the union of such exquisite tenderness and sensibility with so much that was strange and uncouth. When, after describing the influences by which I was surrounded, I went on to give her some idea of my own views and aspirations, she listened as one to whom such thoughts were familiar—who had fathomed depths upon the edge of which I was timidly venturing, and attempted flights, the possibility of which I was only dimly contemplating. Time slipped by so rapidly that I felt I was only beginning to unburden myself, when I was recalled to a recollection of its flight by Mr Hetherington and Mr Alderney getting up to take their leave.

“I shall see Lord Sark to-morrow, and ask him to introduce me to Baron and Baroness

Grandesella," he said, "when I hope often to have the pleasure of seeing you."

"My, how stiff you English are!" said Mattie. "She's your own cousin; why don't you just run up-stairs and call at once? We can find out from the *concierge* whether the Baroness has come in."

"No, no," he replied smiling; "it is as well to be on the safe side. First I'll call with Sark, and he'll introduce me; then I'll call with Keith, and introduce him; then we'll bring Sark here and introduce him to you; then we'll expatiate on your merits to the Grandesellas and bring Sark's influence to bear, and they'll come and call on you; then you return their visit; then we'll all set sail together and go down before the wind."

"And Mr Murkle, and Mrs Clymer," I mentally ejaculated as I listened to this programme, "they'll want to go down before the wind too. I fear me it will be an ill wind, but I trust it may blow 'somebody good.'"

"Good-bye, and God bless you, my dearie," said Hannah—I can't call her Miss Coffin any more—giving me a last embrace. "That's right," she said, turning to Mattie and Stella as they

too kissed me ; “ you make much of her—she’s worth it.”

“ You bet,” said Stella, laughing. “ Now you gentlemen mustn’t be shocked if I occasionally indulge in slang—I’ll only do it when we’re quite alone ; but there are moments—such, for instance, as a parting like this—when it’s a relief to one’s feelings. One must say something, and I was brought up with a prejudice against swearing.”

CHAPTER VII.

MRS CLYMER MEANS MISCHIEF.

THE more Mr Murkle saw of Mrs Clymer, the more he felt convinced, not only that she was a person whom it would be more desirable to have as a friend than as an enemy, but that she might, under the circumstances, be especially valuable to him in the former capacity. He therefore determined to cultivate her acquaintance; and when he asked her what was her usual hour for receiving, she quite understood, and so did he, that one which Lord Sark was not likely to choose was the one which would suit them both best. For she, too, felt instinctively that in Murkle she would find a natural and congenial ally. If he was afraid of Lord Sark's attractions as a possible husband for Altiora, she no less dreaded the fascination which Altiora might

possess for Lord Sark. While she saw in him a financier whom she might turn to profitable account for herself, he saw in her a confederate through whom he might hold the Baron and Baroness in check, if he had reason to suspect they were playing him false. Moreover, there were two or three weak points in the financial combination to which Lord Sark had become a party, which it was not impossible that she might detect; and he felt that it was desirable, therefore, that they should discuss the matter fully, and arrange the nature of the participation in it of Mrs Clymer herself. It was a great relief to Murkle to find, after thoroughly explaining the whole subject to that lady, that though undoubtedly an unusually clever woman, her business capacity was decidedly inferior to that of the Baroness, who had been trained principally by Murkle himself; and he was easily able to satisfy her that Sark was in good hands, so far as his pecuniary prospects were concerned, and to obtain from her a promise of cordial co-operation on terms which he could easily afford to offer. It is wonderful how a conversation, conducted upon purely business principles between two people of opposite sexes, who are neither of them

overburdened with scruples of conscience, creates a rapid intimacy. Each feels a relief as each recognises in the other a breadth of view, where moral questions are concerned, which curiously enough, instead of inspiring mistrust, produces rather a sense of admiration. They each conjecture that there must be a point to which it would not be safe to go without shocking the other, and they may possibly each wonder if the other suspects how remote that point is; but so long as the necessity does not arise, there is evidently no use in going to it. In this confidential intercourse both feel the same scorn of hypocrisy, both the same impulse to a sort of frankness which engenders a certain sympathy; and Mr Murkle and Mrs Clymer could not have felt more intimately acquainted if they had known each other for years, than at the end of their first two hours' chat over the way in which the public were expected to contribute to the pecuniary resources of the contractors and promoters of the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company. Indeed it is probable that the result of a long acquaintanceship would have left them very much less friendly than they were now.

“Is it true that Miss Peto will have a large

fortune of her own, or is she dependent on Baron Grandesella?" asked Mrs Clymer.

"The Baroness brought a large fortune to the Baron on her marriage," replied Murkle. "The late Mr Peto, who died suddenly, left the whole of his property unreservedly to his widow; and as, on her marriage, she refused to have it placed in trust, contrary to my strong representations, it remains with her and her husband to make any settlement on their daughter that they choose."

"Are they in a position to make a large marriage settlement on her now, and would they do it if they were?"

"No doubt they could settle a large sum of money on her, but its amount would depend upon whom she married. If she were to marry her cousin, Lord Sark, for instance, I believe they would make a very considerable sacrifice."

"Should you like to see her married to Lord Sark, Mr Murkle?" and as Murkle hesitated for a moment, Mrs Clymer extended her hand to him with an air of the most engaging sympathy. He put his into it, and to cover his embarrassment—for this woman, having got off finance, was now on her own ground—he put it to his lips. "Tell me frankly," she went on. "We have

not known each other long; but we women, you know, are quick where affairs of the heart are concerned, and I have not seen you together without forming my own conclusions. And she, does she reciprocate?"

"You seem to know so much," said Murkle, "that you need scarcely have asked me that."

"I see," said the lady, pensively drawing her hand from Murkle's, and putting her finger to her forehead. "First, we have to prevent Miss Peto from being married to Lord Sark; secondly, we have to marry Miss Peto to Mr Murkle; thirdly, we have to make the Baron give Miss Peto as much money when she marries Mr Murkle as he would have given her if she had married Lord Sark. Excuse my being so blunt, but there's nothing like bringing down affairs of the affections to a business basis."

"But whom are we to marry Lord Sark to?" said Murkle, who did not quite relish Mrs Clymer's offhand way of arranging such delicate matters, considering that she was as deeply concerned in them as he was. "I made the acquaintance of a lovely American heiress a few nights ago, who, I think, would just be the person to help the Dark Continent Electric Illumination

Company to retrieve his lordship's shattered fortunes."

"Mr Murkle, I imagined you a person of more sense and better taste than to allude to me of Lord Sark's marriage; it is neither sensible nor delicate to force me to talk on a subject which I should not be ashamed to discuss with you if there were any necessity for it, but which I gave you credit for sufficient penetration to understand without expecting me to explain it to you. If you don't understand it, I have entirely over-rated your intelligence; if you do, you should never have alluded to it, even by implication. How long had you known the Baroness before her marriage?" she asked abruptly, without giving him time to apologise or to recover from the blow thus roughly dealt. The effect upon Murkle of her whole speech was very much that which is produced by the sudden hiss followed by the pat of a cat; and though not a person easily rebuked or abashed, he winced involuntarily at the last significant allusion. The movement was not lost upon the sharp eyes of his questioner; and without waiting for an answer, she added — "She must have been an attractive woman twenty years ago, and her fortune must have made her

doubly so. I wonder you allowed the Baron to carry her off. The Baroness tells me he was not a Baron then ;” and Mrs Clymer rose, and in her most silvery tone and tenderest accents, continued—“ I am so sorry, dear Mr Murkle, that I must send you away now ; I have an appointment with Lord Sark, and must go and get ready to go out. I have so enjoyed your visit, which I hope will only prove the first of a series, now that we find we have so many interests in common ;” and she touched the bell, and Murkle found a servant waiting in the ante-room to show him out, before he had clearly realised that his visit had terminated.

He left the house with a disagreeable sensation of defeat, and a consciousness that Mrs Clymer had already discussed him with the Baroness, and was not the woman to make new acquaintances without investigating their antecedents.

It is only due to Murkle to say that he had left a feeling of discomfort in the breast of Mrs Clymer, by his allusion to a beautiful American heiress, very much analogous to that which she had produced in him. Mrs Clymer had good reason to know that Lord Sark was susceptible to the fascinations of the sex. She was not with-

out experience of the powers of her own countrywomen, and she dreaded the influence which Murkle was evidently rapidly acquiring over her lover, and the uses to which, if it suited his purpose, he might put it. Two lovely girls, with fortunes, in the field as rivals, were enough to make any woman feel uncomfortable; but Mrs Clymer was not one to shrink from a contest of this sort, when it was forced upon her, and lacked neither promptitude nor audacity upon such occasions. Within an hour after Murkle had left her, she was sitting alone with the Baroness, and cross-examined that astute personage with a dexterity worthy of a detective.

“I am on my way, my dear Baroness,” she said, “to call upon your neighbours, the great American heiress and her friend,—two of my splurging young countrywomen, who come over to Europe, and give you all such a false impression of American society. Not that I can tolerate it, at its best, but my curiosity has been excited by Mr Murkle about these latest specimens. Do tell me what you think of them, dear Baroness, you who have seen so much of the world?”

“Now, Mrs Clymer, you really are too hard upon your fair *compatriotes*. I think them quite

charming—so original, with a *cachet* quite their own,” replied the Baroness, who had her own reasons for wishing to cement an intimacy with the beautiful heiress. “I am so glad dear Altiora has found such companions; she is downstairs with them now, dear child, so I am sure you will find them at home.”

“I think Mr Murkle is already rather *épris* in that direction,” pursued Mrs Clymer, slyly.

But the Baroness, who saw the drift of this observation, turned the point of it neatly by saying that she did not think this could be the case, as she had heard Mr Murkle remark what a good match Miss Walton would be for Lord Sark. So Mrs Clymer, after some more futile attempts, determined to lose no more time, and a few moments later found herself standing at the door of the *entresol*. When it was opened to her, the notes of a rich contralto voice flooded the ante-chamber, which only ceased when her card was taken in, and a pause, probably of wonder as to who she was, was followed by a summons to enter. A shier person than Mrs Clymer might possibly have been taken aback by the large group of strangers upon whom she was thus forcing an entry. Standing near the piano was a tall girl

whom she devoutly hoped might not be the heiress, for Sark was passionately devoted to music, and her extreme beauty was undeniable: accompanying her was a gentleman, who was probably her singing-master. At the corner of the room was another girl absorbed in oil-painting, also apparently under the direction of a master; while near her was standing a gentleman with a glass in his eye, critically watching her performance. At one of the windows was seated Altiora and an elderly lady darning a stocking, to whom a handsome fair-haired man was talking so earnestly that he scarcely seemed to perceive the entry of the visitor. Evidently the tall girl was the heiress, for she advanced to meet her.

“I must introduce myself as a countrywoman,” said Mrs Clymer. “I have only just heard of your arrival from our mutual friends, Mr Murkle and the Grandesellas, whom I have been calling upon up-stairs; though, of course, I know you well, Miss Walton, by reputation, and saw in the American papers that you had left the States for a trip to Europe.” This was an effort of imagination, but Mrs Clymer felt that it was a safe one. “I could not resist coming to tell you at once how glad I shall be to do anything to make your

stay in Paris agreeable. I am only a visitor myself, as I usually live in London, but I have lived so often here that I almost feel a Parisian; and if you want to do any shopping, can tell you all the best places to go to." Mrs Clymer rattled on with this long speech, as there's nothing like talking to relieve embarrassment, and Miss Walton introduced her to Miss Terrill, who was the lady painting; Mr Alderney, who was the gentleman superintending; Miss Coffin, who was the lady darning; and Mr Hetherington, who was the gentleman talking to her; and to the drawing and singing masters—for she was too republican to ignore their presence. *Altiora* she greeted effusively.

"You find us in the middle of our studies, Mrs Clymer," said Miss Walton. "My friend and I make it a rule to work six hours a-day; but we have just finished our day's labours, so you don't interrupt us, and we are delighted to see you. What with what we've got to learn and see, the days don't seem long enough. Lord Sark is coming to take us to the Louvre. I hope you will stay and go with us. Perhaps you know him? What o'clock did you say your cousin was coming, Bob?" she added, turning to Alderney.

Mrs Clymer felt a cold shiver run down her back, and for a moment her heart seemed to stop beating. Here was the heiress already on such intimate terms with Lord Sark's cousin as to call him Bob, and that nobleman himself might be expected at any moment. How long had this intimacy existed? How was it that Lord Sark had concealed it from her? It seemed incredible that, in the few days which had elapsed since their arrival in Paris, the heiress could have made so much progress. The fact was, that though Alderney had only introduced his cousin a few days before, Sark had been captivated by the delightful air of freedom which reigned in the heiress's establishment, and had fallen in love with the whole party, Miss Coffin included. He was indeed at that moment on his way to them in his *coupé*, looking forward with the utmost delight to the effect which a series of slightly draped Rubens's would produce upon that spinster's unsophisticated mind. There was, in fact, a sort of healthy breezy rush pervading the moral atmosphere in which Mrs Clymer now found herself, which a good deal disturbed her equanimity. She had often stormed a London afternoon tea when she thought Lord Sark might be in danger,

and borne him off triumphantly from the midst of beauties and heiresses ; but this was as little like pursuing him in a London conventional kettle-drum, as deer-driving in Windsor Park is from chamois-hunting in the Alps. There was a social lawlessness about the whole performance just calculated by its freshness to captivate the somewhat *blasé* temperament of his lordship. The reckless way in which girls took their singing and drawing lessons, and received young men and young lady visitors, who were supposed not to be in the way, and to be capable of amusing themselves ; and the absence of any *arrière-pensée* of flirtation going on anywhere,—so confused the intelligence of this sharp-witted lady, that she had scarcely had time to decide upon her own line of action when the door opened and Lord Sark was announced. Though not easily disconcerted, he flushed, barely perceptibly, on seeing Mrs Clymer—an indication of guilty consciousness not lost upon that lady, who greeted him with the easy intimacy of a proprietor ; for this was a moment when she could not afford to be embarrassed by scruples of delicacy. As she did so, she turned to the window where Altiora was talking to Hetherington, irresistibly impelled

by the desire to see what impression the whole episode was making upon the former, when her glance was intercepted by one from Miss Coffin, whose individuality she had till now scarcely noticed, but the flash of whose eye was like that of a sword drawn without provocation upon an unarmed antagonist.

“Why, what a large party of American cousins we shall make,” said Lord Sark, cheerily. “We’re all going to the Louvre, Mrs Clymer. I hope, even though you are not a cousin, you will come with us.”

“Who knows that she ain’t?” said Hannah. “Now it’s my opinion, Mrs Clymer, you and me’ll turn out to be someways related. You never kin tell in a country like Amurika, where marriages and divorces runs so easy-like, where relations mayn’t turn up, even when you least expect them, and least want ’em.”

Mrs Clymer had lived long enough in London fashionable society to know how to avail herself of the weapon commonly called “a well-bred stare,” and she applied it remorselessly to Hannah on hearing this unpleasant suggestion; but it was entirely lost upon that good woman, whose eyes had assumed a dreamy and almost glassy

look, as if she were peering into the records of the past for some clue of the lost relationship. Suddenly she said, "I have it now," and relapsed instantly into silence.

"Oh, do tell us how Mrs Clymer's related to you, Hannah, you dear old thing! I didn't know you had had a relation left in the world," said Mattie.

"I am afraid her utter destitution of them has given a stimulus to her imagination," said Mrs Clymer, somewhat scornfully.

"Come," said Lord Sark, who saw the suppressed passion with which she resented what she feared might seem her humiliation in his eyes, "if we want to see the pictures before the Louvre closes, we must be starting;" and in a few minutes the party was *en route*, without the delicate subject being again alluded to. Here they unexpectedly stumbled upon Ronald Mac-Alpine, who had been unable to resist following his magnet to Paris, but had not yet summoned up courage to call upon her: and it was Altiora's turn to show a slight embarrassment as she introduced him to the rest of the party—observing which, Mrs Clymer and Hannah, in their different ways, became contemplative, and an acute

observer might also have perceived a shade of uneasy interest passing over the handsome countenance of Hetherington; but the two girls and Alderney were too much absorbed with their devotion to art to notice anything; and Lord Sark's attention was so distracted by his admiration for the heiress, and his desire to conceal it from Mrs Clymer, that he, too, hardly noticed the new addition to their party.

"Do tell me," said the heiress to Lord Sark, pointing to a large and fashionable party of English, "why your countrywomen, especially the young ones, all stick their elbows out, particularly when they are shaking hands."

"I am afraid," answered his lordship, "it is a habit they have picked up from their brothers. I can't say it is a very graceful one in either sex."

"Laws!" said Hannah, who had been watching these British feminine greetings with great interest, "that ain't the reason. It's because they laces so tight. You just try and buckle yourself across the waist and chest like them gells, and then see how it eases your breathing to stick out your elbows. Why, you might as well try and take long steps in a tie-back, as take a long breath when you're laced like that, without open-

ing out your elbows ; ain't that so, Mrs Clymer ? you must know,"—and she gave a comical look at that lady's waist and elbows, which was evidently *en revanche* for the well-bred stare to which she had been subjected, and which her opponent was unable to venture upon again. So she took another line : as she could not knock her down with her fan, she patted her playfully on the shoulder with it, saying as she did so, " You naughty, quizzical old thing." She hoped that to be called an " old thing," by an entire stranger, might sting ; but it didn't, for Hannah only gave a sort of chuckle, and said, " Wal, now, you're gettin' real friendly, like relations should be."

" Still, you know, that won't account for the men doing it," said Mattie, anxious to get back to the safer topic of the elbows.

" Laws ! yes it does ; they jest foller the gells. It's the gells that sets the fashion."

" Not in England, I assure you," said Lord Sark, much amused. " In America, I understand, the women take the lead in most things ; but in England, we flatter ourselves that the male sex holds its own."

" Bless you, they flatter themselves just the

same with us! the question is—do they? Now there ain't no one here as knows as much about the men of both countries as Mrs Clymer. I'll jest ask her what she says: which men have you found most difficult to get along with, my dear?"

But Mrs Clymer, who had by this time become convinced that she was too heavily handicapped to be a match for Hannah, affected not to hear this question, but to be absorbed in admiration of a recumbent Venus of Titian, at which Hannah, following the direction of her eyes, could only gasp "My sakes!" and then turning abruptly round, walked off, for once fairly beaten from the field.

CHAPTER VIII.

RONALD MACALPINE'S KELTIC ENTERTAINMENT.

DURING the few weeks that followed this episode, the intimacy of the party with whom the reader has now made acquaintance, increased with the rapidity which so often results from a chance meeting of a group of strangers in a foreign country, who, for lack of other friends, find themselves constantly thrown into each other's society. It is true that Hetherington, Alderney, Murkle, the Grandesellas, Lord Sark, and Mrs Clymer were not without their Paris acquaintances, but for various reasons the Californian girls formed the nucleus round which the party chiefly gathered, and Ronald MacAlpine was soon drawn into the vortex, and became, perhaps because it was an easy way of meeting Altiora, one of their most devoted attendants. Altiora's

existence, prior to that episode in her affections which she confided to the reader in her own words in the first pages of this history, had been so comparatively removed from contact with society, that she failed in her appreciation of her lover to convey any true impression of that gentleman's real character or tendencies — of which, indeed, she was totally ignorant. Though nominally a member of a learned profession, MacAlpine had early arrived at the conclusion that he had a nobler mission in life than that of defending clients, and that by developing what he was pleased to term his genius, he might aspire to the position of a social apostle in the age in which he lived. He was just clever enough to be the victim of a vanity which could feed upon a variety of superficial tastes, which the more amiable of his friends called talents, and which therefore secured him a certain amount of admiration and even homage. He dabbled in philosophy, and had read enough of Herbert Spencer to talk with a profound authority about the "unknowable," and patter his thin agnosticism to progressive young ladies at London dinner-parties. He had written two or three novels, profusely decorated with stanzas of erotic poetry,

which he had subsequently culled from them, and published in a volume apart, and called 'Lyrics to Leda.' He had, moreover, a turn for musical composition, and from this little volume he had made a second selection, which he entitled 'The Swan's Last Notes,' and forced them for a third time in that form upon an admiring public. Then, as he had a tolerable tenor voice, expressive eyes, and slender fingers, he used to sing to his own accompaniment at the piano, when his stock of philosophical small-talk was exhausted: added to which, he was an authority upon all matters connected with art, from a cathedral to a garter; and his rooms in Mayfair were more like Abou Anticha's back-shop in Damascus, than a bachelor's quarters in London.

There was something very suggestive of the progress of the age to find this descendant of an old line of Scottish chiefs, whose ancestor had been an aide-de-camp of Charles Edward in the '45, and whose family traditions were of the rudest and most barbaric type, thus developing by the process of social evolution into a philosophical *littéraire*, a musical æsthete, dabbling in every evanescent hobby which a sated society could invent, and devising new forms of eccen-

tricity, which might increase at once his notoriety and his hold upon the world of fashion in which he lived. By dint of great industry at his little pursuits, a persevering ingenuity in concentrating attention upon himself, and a shrewd appreciation of the weaknesses of his fellow-men, or rather women—for it was among the latter that Ronald was a special success—he had conquered for himself the position of being, if not a lion, at least a promising whelp; and during the season the looking-glass over his mantelpiece was abundantly wedged all round with cards of invitation; while his services were required as a sort of *entrée*, to lighten the more solid fare of fashion at numerous country houses. His great-grandfather, if he spoke English at all, probably did so after the fashion of those Hebridean characters with which Mr Black's novels have made us so familiar; but Ronald had a style scarcely less widely removed from the ordinary English vernacular of twenty years ago. There was an unctuous deliberation in his method of drawling out his criticisms in a somewhat high key, with a peculiar distinctness, which, in order to make them the more impressive, was frequently interrupted by an affected hesitation, partly deprecatory, partly insinuating,

and by a love of giving advice with an apologetic manner, implying at the same time a conscious authority, especially to the fairer portion of his congregation. On these occasions his utterances and gestures resembled those of a lady-like bishop. To appropriate a novel and startling theory from some author or speaker cleverer than himself, and to give it vent, with a carefully prepared delicacy of diction, to a group of female adorers, and expatiate upon it to them as a profound and original thesis of his own, was an art which Ronald MacAlpine had cultivated to a high pitch of perfection; and when he called upon our Californian friends the day after he had been introduced to them at the Louvre, he promised himself an exquisite satisfaction in initiating their Western minds into the finer subtleties of that delicate thought, upon matters philosophic and artistic, upon which he fancied himself so eminently qualified to discourse.

“I scarcely recognised you,” said Altiora, one day when she happened to meet him paying a visit in the *entresol*, “the first day I saw you at the Louvre,—you look so different in the kilt, to which I am accustomed.”

“I wear my national costume,” said Ronald,

“when I am where it does not occasion too much remark, because it possesses a deeper meaning than was ever suspected by the rude barbarians from whom I have inherited the right to do so. “Will you allow me,” he went on, turning to the two American girls,—“nay, are you sure it will not weary you, if I permit myself to explain the true significance of—er—the Keltic raiment?”

“Oh, pray do,” said Stella; “but I am afraid, as I have never seen it, that I shall not be able to understand it unless I saw it on. Don’t you think you could just run off to your hotel now and put it on?”

“I am delighted that you show so much interest, Miss Walton. I always keep it with me in illustration of my theory; and if you will do me the honour to take tea in my rooms some afternoon, I shall then be able to enlarge upon my present remarks. You are aware, doubtless, that at the time of the invasion of Scotland by the Romans, the inhabitants of the southern portion of that country were costumed after the fashion of their ancestors, while the Kelts of the north confined themselves principally to skins, either their own, or—er—those of other animals. I

think I may venture to assert, with some confidence, that the Kelts, struck by the picturesque beauty of the uniform of the Roman soldiers, with whom they had thus been brought into sanguinary conflict, arranged their skins in imitation of it; and so we have a rude resemblance, continuing to the present day, of a costume which, as a pure matter of artistic effect, would, if it were restored to the original Roman ideal, be far more consonant with the loftiest conceptions of raiment than the fantastic clothing at present in vogue. I am therefore now engaged in modifying and adapting the Keltic dress, and should much wish to consult you in regard to several points—which, perhaps, you will be better able to judge of when you see it on. The hose, as now worn, represents no article of Roman attire; I am therefore doubtful whether to draw them over the knee and attach them with a—er—garter, or to reduce them by about two inches, to the length of an ordinary sock, which would make them correspond with the height of the Roman buskin.”

“What! leaving so much more of the limb bare?” Stella had still retained too much of the prejudices of her countrywomen to say leg.

“Oh, that would be what I think you gentlemen would call quite too exquisitely precious!”

“Pardon me,” said Ronald. “To prevent the cause of art suffering injury from the vulgar ridicule which has been cast upon it by silly cartoons in a—er—weekly periodical, and in dramatic travesties, I refrain from using art language in so early a stage of evolution. The jacket, which was evidently an imitation of the corselet, must be abandoned; and the kilt, instead of being fastened round the waist, must depend from the shoulders.”

“Oh, how delightful! Mind you put it on that way when we come to tea with you,” said Stella.

“I am alluding to its modified condition—as I propose it should be worn, Miss Walton; in its present form it would be—er—rather too short. Thus elongated, it becomes a chiton or tunic, over which will flow the plaid scarf, which thus becomes the toga, of which it is a manifest relic.”

“It would require as much modification as the kilt,” said Altiora, “to resemble the flowing robe which we see on Roman statues.”

“Naturally, in order to adapt its folds, it would have to be cut out of a circular piece. I am

merely giving you the outlines of the idea. When I have elaborated it, I purpose lecturing on the subject before the Costume Reform Society, and entertain hopes that a movement may be inaugurated by which those art principles which we have hitherto applied chiefly to house decoration may be introduced into modern attire, and effect a revolution in accordance with the—er—æsthetic spirit of the age. At present, I regret to say that art progress in dress is confined almost entirely to women; though," and he cast a reproving glance upon his fair audience, "if you will allow me to venture a criticism, I perceive a sad lack of any of the loftier taste conceptions in the costumes before me."

"Wal, now," said Hannah, who resented this reflection upon American millinery, "I think we're all fixed up to the last notch. I guess, before you git any of us to go about in your Kiltic dress, as you call it, we shall have to see what it's like."

A loud burst of laughter from the three girls followed this sally of Hannah's, under cover of which Ronald got up to take his departure, not however, without a final arrangement being made for the next meeting at his afternoon tea.

When, a few days after, the engagement was kept, their host, appropriately attired in his Highland dress, received them in the apartment which he had already contrived to decorate with various articles of *bric-a-brac* and solitary flowers —while a piano, which he had hired for the occasion, was suggestive of the Lyrics of Leda and the Last Notes of the Swan. The Baron had been tempted by the prospect of expanding his chest, in bass accompaniment. Mrs Clymer had come, because she felt sure that her voice had a more powerful compass than Stella's, and she was haunted by the fear of that young lady's fascinations over Lord Sark; his lordship had come, because the feminine attractions generally were irresistible; Murkle had come, because he designed seriously to lay siege to the heiress; and the Baroness was there, of course, with Altiora. Hetherington and Alderney, in their capacity of cousins and permanent escorts, could not be omitted from such a gathering; while Hannah had come, impelled by an overpowering desire to see the Keltic dress, which, in accordance with the progressive art spirit of the age, she fancied she might be required to adopt. The little scream which she gave at the sight of

Ronald's bare knees indicated more plainly than any words could have done the shock which her maidenly innocence had received, and she scarcely listened with patience to the plaintive wail of the Swan as he accompanied himself on the piano. It was in the midst of a quartet by the Baron, Ronald, Mrs Clymer, and Altiora, who had a considerable musical talent, that Mr Murkle enticed Stella into a small room adjoining, under the pretence of examining a newly purchased picture, and opened his campaign. He had been leading up to it for some days past, and the reputed heiress knew too much of the opposite sex not to be perfectly aware of his intentions. She seemed rather disposed to encourage them than otherwise, and to his delight said, "What a charming little room for a quiet chat, Mr Murkle! It is quite refreshing occasionally to have a talk with a practical business man when one is among people who are so much given to pleasure or the more trifling pursuits of life."

"I have long felt, Miss Walton," said Murkle, "that you and I have very little sympathy with the tastes which absorb some of our friends here," and he cast a somewhat contemptuous glance round the carefully decorated little room.

“ It is so common to suppose,” she responded, “ that sympathy needs feeding by sentiment, and that sentiment needs to be stimulated by music, or poetry, or flowers, or moonlight nights. For my part, I can feel quite as sentimental over a share-list as over the most lovely view in nature; and what profounder sympathy can exist than that which binds in a common interest a pair of bulls or a couple of bears on the Stock Exchange?” Stella heaved a sigh charged with such deep feeling as she made this remark, and gazed into the depths of Mr Murkle’s eyes with so much tender meaning, that that gentleman, who at first suspected she might be laughing at him, changed his mind under an impulse of gratified vanity, and gave his chair a little hitch which put it three inches nearer to hers. Stella, with a most delightful air of unconsciousness, reciprocated, as if quite accidentally, by a corresponding hitch, and reduced the distance three inches more.

Murkle, whose position and avocation in life had not afforded him many opportunities of cultivating the fair sex, excepting under very questionable conditions, now unexpectedly found youth, beauty, and wealth smiling on him with

a degree of encouragement which surpassed his most sanguine hopes. For him the whole atmosphere seemed suddenly charged with a subtle and exquisite aroma, under the influence of which his head began to swim, and his heart to beat with a violence which he had never experienced before, except on one occasion when he had found himself compelled to offer his body as a target at twenty paces to an angry opponent in Italy, who had first accused him of cheating at cards, and then added insult to injury by calling him out; but he was conscious that the pulsation from a thrill of pleasure produced a very different sensation from the pulsation with a thrill of alarm—a physiological problem which *Altiora* might have sought to solve, but which he was too much engaged otherwise to dwell upon. His eye roved from the slender arched foot to the white taper fingers of his charmer, playing with a tassel almost touching his hand, to the tempting, exquisitely moulded parted lips, and then stealing more timidly upwards to the half-raised lids fringed with their long silky lashes; and as they suddenly opened and caught his conscious gaze with their full, soft, penetrating glow, he morally sank a captive at

the feet of his enslaver, — an emotion entirely new to him seemed to deprive him of the power of utterance.

“ Miss Walton,” he said at last, in a changed voice, “ you exercise an influence over me such as no woman ever has before done. I meant in bringing you here for a moment’s conversation to tell you all I felt, but that has become impossible, for my whole nature seems to have undergone a revolution.”

“ But you can always try,” said Stella, sympathetically. “ First tell me what you felt first, and then tell me what you feel now. You will find me a most interested listener.”

“ Well,” said Murkle, thus encouraged, “ what I felt was that I recognised in you a person whose talents, wealth, and beauty eminently qualified you to adorn any society; and I was going to propose to you, upon a purely business basis—all sentiment apart, because I supposed that we were both people incapable of being influenced by it—an alliance by which certain advantages which I may venture to say I possess, might supplement yours. In other words, Miss Walton, I imagined that I could calmly ask you to be my wife upon a practical estimate of the

benefits we might both derive from such a union. I am now conscious that it is impossible for me to make you such a proposal on the grounds I originally intended. I feel that they were unworthy of you ; but I none the less lay my heart at your feet."

" On what grounds now ?" asked Stella, calmly.

" On those of a passionate devotion to the woman I love. O Stella !"

But Stella interrupted him.

" I prefer the other ones. Do you know you are sinking rapidly in my estimation, Mr Murkle ? I gave you credit for sound practical common-sense, instead of which you are talking the usual sentimental nonsense, which I am tired of hearing. Please let us get back to business. Before I can entertain your original idea, you would have to make out a schedule of your assets and liabilities. I should naturally require some references as to the commercial standing of the firm, and I should have to look carefully into the nature of the contracts and other enterprises in which it may be engaged. The character of the securities you might have to offer for any contributions I might make would have to be considered ; and if, after going

into the whole thing thoroughly, I should find everything satisfactory, I am not prepared to say that a partnership—even of the character you at first contemplated—might not be possible. Besides business references, I should require social ones; or, stay—there is one which will quite satisfy me. If Miss Peto, who has known you all her life, endorses you with her approbation, I shall be satisfied, so far as your personal character is concerned. There will remain only the financial considerations. When these are all settled, I will lay before you a balance-sheet of my own assets, and we can decide upon the extent of my contributions. But you will understand that in saying this I commit myself to nothing. Until the final contract is signed, the parties to it must not be considered bound in any way; and we must fix a time limit—say two months from now—at the expiration of which term this preliminary arrangement is at an end.”

Murkle looked up at the end of this speech with very much the expression of an angry man who has been held under a *douche* against his will. Naturally of a violent temperament, when his will was thwarted, he found himself in a position

which, while it humiliated him, rendered him absolutely powerless. Miss Walton had, after all, merely made him the proposition which he had intended to make her; and he now became aware, when the tables were turned upon himself, of the insult which it implied, and which he had confessed he had intended to offer the woman for whom at that moment he felt a devouring passion. "If you are only to be won by schedules, and balance-sheets, and assets, Miss Walton," he said bitterly, "I will win you that way."

"There," she replied; "you can't think how much better I like you like that,—when you are nice and natural and practical and business-like, than when you make yourself ridiculous by talking sentiment. Now we quite understand each other. The first move in the game which you talk of winning—mind, in two months—is the approval of Miss Peto to the whole transaction."

And as the quartet had reached the *crescendo* which indicated the final flourish, Miss Walton got up languidly and strolled into the next room, followed by Murkle, in a more suppressed condition than was usual with that gentleman.

Although Mrs Clymer had particularly distinguished herself in the quartet, the disappear-

ance of Stella and Murkle had not been lost upon her, and she gazed keenly into their countenances when they returned. Stella's face was a blank page, but much was to be read by so astute an observer in Murkle's countenance; and Mrs Clymer determined to devote herself to consoling him, as she called it to herself, for the rest of the afternoon. But indications of discomfort on the part of Murkle suggested that the process was anything but consolatory to that gentleman, who was the first to make his escape, in a very bad humour, from Ronald MacAlpine's Keltic entertainment.

CHAPTER IX.

STELLA'S CONFIDENCES.

IF, the night after the occurrences just related, some of the gentlemen most interested could possibly have peeped into a certain bedroom on the *entresol* of No. Quatre-vingt dix-huit, Rue du dix-huit Mars, dix-huit cent soixante et onze, it is probable that they would have found some difficulty in withdrawing their indiscreet and admiring gaze, while it is certain that they would have heard a good deal that was not intended for their eager ears. For here, wrapped in flowing *peignoirs*, with their luxuriant hair rippling down their backs, and their daintily slipped little feet resting on the fender, languidly reposing in a couple of easy-chairs, sat Stella Walton and Mattie Terrill, regardless of the fact that it was one o'clock in the morning,—as the opera

from which they had just returned was over at an unusually late hour,—one looking like a queen *en déshabillé*, and the other like a gipsy in full dress, but both in their way with a charm peculiarly their own—evidently very wide awake, and fully determined to take advantage of that witching small hour of the morning when girls most love to unburden their fluttering little hearts to each other, and exchange delicious confidences. And here I must remind my reader, in order to prevent confusion, that the girls had changed names, and, lest they should unguardedly betray themselves before the world, had determined to keep up the delusion when alone. It had become a sort of *idée fixe* with Mattie Terrill—whose real name was Stella Walton—that she was unusually plain (which was by no means the case), and that she was more likely to be married for her money than for love—which, considering her colossal fortune, was no doubt true; and hence she had persuaded her friend, before leaving America, to become a party to her little *ruse*, and adopt the *rôle* which that young lady willingly undertook, inspired thereto by the innate love of mischief which was a prominent feature in her character. Even Miss Coffin en-

tered into the joke with a certain grim enjoyment, as, according to her, "men were mainly made to be fooled;" but she had made so many mistakes in attempting to address the girls by their changed names in public, that it had come to be an understood thing that when she wanted to attract the ear of the false heiress, she always began her remark with "Say!" and when she wanted to talk to the real heiress, who had been her pet from babyhood, she addressed her as "Honey!" By rigidly confining herself to this rule, and never venturing to introduce them to strangers, she had so far avoided any serious or compromising mistakes.

"Mattie, dear," said the lovely Stella, suddenly disclosing a small packet, which she had kept concealed in her lap, and drawing from it a cigarette, "I am going to have a smoke: they say it is calming to the brain, and I feel like wanting to be calmed;" and she lit her cigarette at the candle, and gave a puff which was half a sigh,—an untoward combination, which brought on an immediate fit of coughing.

"Bob says it does not really calm you unless you inhale," said Mattie. "I tried it the other day, but the only effect was to choke me to a

most exciting extent. Fortunately, as I told him, I did not want calming; whereupon he took such a deep inspiration of smoke, that I quite trembled lest it should never reappear: it did, after some time, through his nose. He said he found it necessary, when he was with me, to smother his feelings. I said I would not give much for feelings that could be smothered by a whiff of tobacco-smoke. Then he said that I did not know what it was to be penniless. I did not see the connection of this remark, but I suppose he meant, poor fellow, that he was so poor that he could not buy himself enough cigarettes; so I said, rather heartlessly, that the best thing to do, if you had a bad and expensive habit which you could not afford, was to give it up. Then he said it was not smoking, it was something else he was trying to give up. I asked him 'What?' on which he bluntly replied, 'An idiotic attachment.' I said I was very happy to hear that he thought that being in love with improper or married women was idiotic, as to my mind this custom, so prevalent in Paris, quite accounted for the idiocy of the French youth generally; and I was very glad that he had come to take a sensible and moral view of the matter. You see I

thought it best for his good to speak frankly, and not to pretend to be so innocent or prudish as not to dare to call things by their right names.

“ ‘Good heavens, Mattie!’ he burst out, ‘you don’t suspect me of anything so shocking? The person I love is one of the purest and best of her sex.’

“ ‘Then I don’t see anything in the least idiotic about it,’ I said.

“ ‘But how can I marry without anything to marry upon?’ he went on. ‘Do you know what my income is, Mattie? exactly one pound a-day; and I have always been so glad it wasn’t more, because it would have confused my accounts. Now a pound a-day is a nice easy sum to remember; and I like my studies so much better than any profession or appointment that could be offered me, that I have refused everything, and been quite happy with it, till now I find that all my happiness in life is blasted by the smallness of the amount.’

“ ‘But,’ I said, ‘if the “person,” as you call her, is worth anything, and cares for you, she will gladly share a pound a-day with you. Why shouldn’t you go and live in some cheap place and study together?’

“ ‘Do you really mean it, Mattie?’ he said, blushing very much, and looking at me very earnestly: and then seeing, apparently, that I did mean it, he took my hand, and said, ‘Oh, my darling, how happy you have made me!’ and so on. It’s no use saying all he said. It all happened this morning when you were out riding with Mr Murkle, and I was alone with him here studying the Zend Avesta. You know he is making translations of the Yaçna and Vispered, and all the other writings on Mazdeism, and I am learning the character so as to try and help him; he has just finished a translation of the Vidæ Vadata, or the law against demons. You can’t think how interesting it is! Imagine what fun it will be, Stella, when he finds out that, instead of five dollars a-day to live on, we shall have nearly five thousand!”

“My dear Mattie,” exclaimed Stella, whose large eyes had been getting rounder and rounder during this recital, “you take my breath away! Why, how slyly you have managed matters! even I am taken by surprise. Do you mean to say that you have engaged yourself to Bob Alderney?”

“Well, not irrevocably. In the first place,

while he is studying Mazdeism with me, I am going to study him with Mazdeism. I asked him if he was prepared, should I require him to do so, to give up his beloved orientalisms, and become a stockbroker in New York. You should have seen the wry face he made at the prospect of being a possible millionaire. I don't know which he hated most—the pill or the gilding; however, he swallowed it, and I let him give me one kiss, poor fellow, to take the taste out of his mouth, and said, 'Then that is settled.' I shall let him remain in this delusion for a month or more,—it will have an excellent moral effect upon him. He said ruefully, 'I thought you began by agreeing that we were to live on a pound a-day and study.'

“ ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘I constantly change my mind.’ I'm going to make myself as disagreeable to him as I can all the time we are engaged, just to see what kind of a temper he has got; and then, if he stands the ordeal, when he discovers at last, that besides my fortune he possesses a wife with an angelic disposition, the moral surprise will be more delightful than the material. Oh, Stella, what a splendid thing it is to find a man who hates money so much that he won't object to my

giving most of it away, if I have a mind to, and who will marry me on five dollars a-day, regardless of consequences !”

“ I call it simply reckless,” said Stella. “ How does he know how many little consequences you may not have ?” and then she jumped up and put her arms round her friend’s neck, which she moistened with a few tears of honest congratulation, which, when Mattie felt, she said, “ Why, Stella, darling, what’s the matter ?”

“ Oh, I am so happy,” said the beauty.

“ Yes ; but that’s not all,” said Mattie. “ You’re a little sad, too ; tell me what it is about—confidence for confidence, you know. It seems to me, though we have scarcely been a month in Paris, that the romance of our lives is overtaking us pretty quickly ; and I have been so absorbed with my own affairs, I have not been watching yours.”

“ Ah, mine are much more complicated,” said Stella, smiling through the large pearl-drops that stood in her eyes. “ At present there are three men making love to me in various degrees, and animated by various sentiments ; and I am making violent love to the one I hate, and turning a cold shoulder on the one I like, and

coquetting with the one to whom I am absolutely indifferent."

It was now Mattie's turn to display wonderment, while Stella went on with a calm analysis of the situation.

"And that is only the least of it. It is like the house that Jack built. This is the man that Stella hates. This is Stella who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the girl who despises the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the man in love with the girl who despises the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the fool who is jealous of the man in love with the girl who despises the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. From which brilliant illustration you obtain a *dramatis personæ* of four men and three women all inextricably entangled in the web of their affections."

"My dear Stella, how silly you are! How on

earth do you expect me to make head or tale of such a jumble as that? Do put names on them," said Mattie.

"The man, then, whom I hate, but to whom I make love, is Mr Murkle. The man making love to me, and whom I love—there is no use mincing matters by calling it '*like*'—is Lord Sark; the woman in love with Lord Sark, is Mrs Clymer; the girl who despises her, is Altiora Peto; the man in love with Altiora is Keith Hetherington; the fool who is jealous of Keith Hetherington, because he was once himself, and may be still, in love with Altiora, though he is now coquetting with me, is Ronald MacAlpine. Now, in order to enlighten your mind, which, my dear Mattie, has been a good deal bewildered by your studies of the Zend Avesta, I will enter fully into detail. Know, then, that it is the fixed determination of Mr Murkle to marry either Altiora or me. He really prefers me, partly because I have taken the trouble to captivate him, and partly because he supposes I have so much the largest fortune; but then, I am not Lord Sark's cousin, or connected with the aristocracy, so he fluctuates in his feelings, and when he is alone with Altiora he tries to make love to her, but does not succeed,

because she can't bear him ; and when he is alone with me, he tries to make love to me, and does succeed, curiously enough, because I can't bear him either. Should he find out that I am not an heiress, nothing could save Altiora from Murkle, for he seems to have some hold over the Grandesellas which would compel Altiora to sacrifice herself. I intend, therefore, to hook him, land him, and when Altiora is otherwise safely provided for, sell him. I am convinced he is a scoundrel and deserves no better fate. Now I believe Lord Sark to be honestly and sincerely in love with me and not with my supposed wealth, and to be no less honestly and sincerely desirous of escaping from the clutches of the Clymer ; but I am also convinced that dear Altiora, though she does all she can to conceal it, is no less honestly and sincerely in love with Lord Sark, and the only way of saving her from Murkle is by her marriage with him, which the Grandesellas are most anxious for. Hence I disguise my feelings and behave brutally to him,—*hinc illæ lacrimæ*, as Bob would say," and she laughed through them. "I could not do a better turn to the man I love than save him from the Clymer and marry him to Altiora ; unfortunately

Keith Hetherington is in love with Altiora, and he would be worthy of her, but he must be sacrificed, as she does not seem to care for him, and the Grandesellas would not hear of it, as he is only a second son. As for Ronald MacAlpine, with his scraps of poetry, and his literary dabbings, and his musical compositions, and his æsthetic jargon and smattering of philosophy, I merely amuse myself with him because he seems to be a typical specimen of the age in which we live, and to keep him from bothering other people. There now," she concluded,—“with all this on my brain, do you wonder at my trying to calm it with a cigarette?”

“Why, Stella,” said Mattie, as she jumped up with undisguised admiration, “you’re a perfect heroine, you grand, self-sacrificing creature; but I won’t let you do it,—you shan’t throw your happiness away, to say nothing of the worldly advantages, which I don’t think so much of myself, in this way. I shall find out what Altiora’s real sentiments in the matter are, and I shall tell Lord Sark. Poor man! are his feelings not to be taken into consideration? if, as you say, he really loves you, are you both to be sacrificed to this excess of chivalry?”

“And you would have me stand by and see a noble nature like Altiora’s trampled upon by a wretch like Murkle?” interrupted Stella. “Whatever happens, I will not provide for my own happiness while that contingency remains open. If I have obtained a certain power over the man, I mean to use it—if not for his own good, as that seems impossible, at all events to prevent his doing harm to others. No, Mattie, don’t interfere in this matter. I am responsible for the influence your fortune gives me while it is supposed to be mine, and I am going to see what good I can do with it. I made a mental resolution to that effect when you asked us to change characters, or I would never have consented to play the part of heiress. You must let me play it my own way till the time comes for handing it over to Bob. And till that time comes, our secret must be jealously preserved.”

“Trust me for that,” said Mattie. “If Bob had the slightest suspicion that I was the heiress, he would disappear into the deserts of Arabia, and write me love-letters in cuneiform, explaining the matrimonial disabilities of a pauper. He must not know anything about it till the last moment. But though I am not the heiress now, I still have

the responsibilities attaching to my prospects, and in the meantime I am not going to let all the self-sacrifice be on one side,"—which enigmatical remark Mattie rounded off with a portentous yawn, to indicate that even the most interesting love-conversation must have an end.

CHAPTER X.

MR MURKLE MAKES A DOUBLE PROPOSAL.

I WISH I understood the law of crises. I suppose it has an intimate connection with that other mysterious problem, the law of chances. If one comes to that, all laws are problems, and the most incomprehensible of all are the laws of the land. This arises from the fact that judges and juries always treat unfortunate mortals as if they could control circumstances, and circumstances never controlled them. In other words, the anomalies of our jurisprudence, not to say its cruelty and injustice, arise from an imperfect appreciation of the laws of free-will and responsibility; for this reason I have not the slightest respect for the laws of the land. If I obey them, I do so for the same reason that I obey mamma, for whom also I have not any respect—because

it would be most inconvenient not to do so. If I thought that human laws had the remotest resemblance to those which are divine, I should either not only obey but respect them, or else, perhaps, not respect those which were divine. I merely mention this in the solitude of my chamber, to the privacy of my journal, which, I am sure, no human eye will ever see; because, since it has become a question of marrying me to some one, whether I like it or not, I have been reading up the subject in some law books which Bob Alderney borrowed for me, and the distinction they make between *femmes soles* and *femmes couvertes* is perfectly monstrous—utterly opposed to reason and common-sense. I have constructed half-a-dozen cases, where to be their victim would involve an outrage and violation of the holiest instincts of a woman's nature. That is why I began by saying I wish I understood the law of crises, because, should I ever be forced to obey those instincts which I believe to be divine rather than the human law, there would come a crisis. Now I have always had a theory that from time to time our lives culminate to crises. Then the crisis bursts, and we begin again, and slowly or rapidly, as the case may be, culminate

to another crisis. I am very young, but I have already seen enough to know that these critical periods are inevitable incidents in the system of the universe. They occur with individuals, they occur with nations, they occur even in nature. The history of the world and of humanity attests the truth of this statement; but what is the law by which they are governed? It is evident that they depend upon combinations, which seem fortuitous, of individual influences, and this connects them with the law of chances. For instance, I am taking a walk. I come to a fork in the road. I doubt whether I will go to the right or the left. Without any apparent motive I go to the right. I accidentally meet some one. That chance meeting turns out the pivot upon which my whole future life hinges. It changes my destiny. Had I gone to the left, it would not have taken place, and the fate of hundreds, which were subsequently to be influenced by mine, would have been different, as well as my own. In our blindness our fates cross and recross, and our destinies become bound together by those chains of circumstances, the links of which are surely forged in the invisible world. I feel a sort of iron web being woven about me even now. I instinct-

ively sense the organisms whose destinies are linked with mine, whether for good or evil, irrespective of my will, with which, since I have been in Paris, I have come into contact; they are—Mr Murkle, Hannah, Lord Sark, Mrs Clymer, Stella Walton, and Mr Hetherington; as to Mattie Terrill, Bob Alderney, and Mr MacAlpine, their fates may indirectly affect mine, but only remotely. The Baron and mamma I have had to count with from the first. Our three threads formed the skein to begin with, to which Mr Murkle's was almost immediately added. Oh, if I could only peep into the other world, and watch the "Fates," as they were called by the ignorant old heathen, weaving the other five into them! The reason I feel so sure of this is, that during the past month I have had private conversations with several of the above-mentioned individuals, and each pregnant with fate. I will narrate them, beginning with Mr Murkle. We were riding together in the Bois de Boulogne when it took place.

"Altiora," he began, "you are now a woman, and a sensible woman, and the time has come for me to speak to you frankly upon a subject of the utmost importance to us both. Ever since you

were twelve years old, I determined to win you for my wife. You need fear no opposition on the part of the Baron or your mother, should you decide to take me for your husband. You have known me from infancy, while I have never lost an opportunity of manifesting the admiration which I sincerely felt for your character as I watched it develop. The time has now come for me to tell you this, and to ask you for your answer."

"Mr Murkle," I replied quietly, "it is because I have known you from my childhood, and have had every opportunity of studying your character, that I feel convinced we are totally unsuited for each other. While I am very sensible of your kindness and the compliment it implies, I am sure you will not attempt to force my inclinations in this matter."

The peculiar dark predatory look, with which I am so familiar, clouded his face as he answered—

"I was prepared for this refusal. Now that I have had the advantage of seeing as well as of hearing of Mr MacAlpine, it is accounted for; but no rival should stand in the way, had I not had occasion to modify my determination as to

the line of conduct I had chalked out for myself. I am not, as you know, *Altiora*, a sentimental man, nor am I a harsh one, except when I am driven to harshness to accomplish my ends. It is not necessary for me, therefore, unless I am forced to it, to tell you why it would not be in your power to resist my will in this matter if I chose to exercise it. You may think this an empty threat, but were it expedient, I could prove to you at this moment that it is not. I hope it never may be necessary for me to allude to it again. I can offer you an escape from the fate you seem so much to dread," he added sardonically, "if you will help to provide me with another. It may seem strange for me in one breath to ask you to become my wife, and in the next to assist in advancing my suit with some one else, but I have never regarded marriage from a sentimental point of view. In Miss Walton, I find nearly all the advantages which you so eminently possess. She is clever, beautiful, and wealthy; and if she is not so well connected as you are, her nationality dispenses with considerations which would be important were she an Englishwoman. I have therefore decided upon placing my hand at her disposal. By

entering Parliament, I have laid the foundations of a social position which she is calculated at once to grace and to improve. You will see that it is essentially in your interest to use the great influence which you possess with her and her two friends, especially the old one," he pursued with a sneer, "to induce her to regard my suit favourably. Having known me all your life, your testimony to my worth of character, amiability of disposition, and matrimonial temperament generally, cannot fail to have weight. I know, dear Altiora; that, under the circumstances, I can rely upon you," and he held out his hand as though to conclude the bargain. I took it in silence. On the one hand, I was not going to commit myself in words to this unholy alliance; on the other, I wished to lull his suspicions as to what I really intended to do in the matter. For *coûte que coûte*, whatever might be the value of this threat, that if he failed to win Stella, he would fall back upon me, I was determined never to let that dear noble girl fall a victim to so unscrupulous an adventurer; and now that he had shown me his cards, I was fully decided to avail myself of my knowledge to frustrate his designs. I therefore even went so far as to re-

spond to his enclosing palm with a gentle pressure, which he might construe as he liked, and merely said—

“I now quite understand you. You will agree with me that the subject is too delicate for us to discuss further;” and in the same breath, in order to change it, pointed out Lord Sark driving in a victoria with Mrs Clymer.

“Ah,” he said, “there goes my rival! but I know how to put a spoke most effectually into his wheel. With the Clymer for an ally, and the company for a trap, or the company for an ally and Mrs Clymer for a trap,—it does not matter much which way you put it,—Lord Sark is not a dangerous antagonist. By the way,” he added, as though a sudden thought flashed upon him, “if I succeed with Stella Walton, what nobler mission could you desire than to save Lord Sark from the Clymer? You would make the Baron and your mother eternally grateful by marrying your cousin.”

“Yes,” I said; “but I should have to hold my affections in suspense until you had terminated your campaign successfully with Stella, and that might not be possible. Don’t you think you are risking a great deal in suggesting such an idea?”

Suppose Stella refused you, would you expect Sark and me to change our minds?"

"Oh, she won't refuse me if you will only say a good word for me. At any rate, of one thing I feel certain, and that is, that she will never accept him. She makes the most marked difference in her manner towards his lordship and myself. However, far be it from me to suggest that you should involve your affections in any direction,—all I want is your support with Stella."

An idea here rapidly flashed across me, and I gave a sigh which caused him to look up hurriedly.

"You were ridiculously mistaken in thinking," I said,—and I am conscious I blushed while speaking, at the delicate ground I was treading on,—“that I was in love with Mr MacAlpine. It is as well that you should know, what I should have told you had you pressed me further, that my affections are already engaged, but not to him. Of course I do not know the nature of the threat you hold *in terrorem* over me. I hope, as you say, that there will never be any necessity for you to enforce it; but I can conceive of no pressure which it would ever be in your power to bring to bear which could compel me to marry against

my inclinations, the more especially since they have become already involved in another quarter."

Mr Murkle, who was by no means a polite person when he was off his guard, gave vent to a long, low whistle; and at that moment Lord Sark and Mrs Clymer, seeing us, drove up. Her presence alone with him at such an hour, and her audacity in coming up to speak to us, caused me to colour violently; and I felt that the conviction suddenly forced itself upon Mr Murkle's mind, as he observed it, that he had not to look further for the object of my attachment, the more especially as Mrs Clymer could not resist shooting at me one of those jealous glances which so acute an observer as my riding companion could not fail to intercept.

"Whose fate were you discussing with such earnestness?" she remarked, with a meaning laugh. "My lord here has been bowing in vain to Miss Peto, but she seemed to have no eyes nor ears except for you, Mr Murkle."

"We were just then talking about you, Mrs Clymer," he answered with the greatest coolness. "You know the proverb, 'Talk of the—angel,' and so forth."

"Lord Sark and I were much less scandalous,"

she remarked, "for we were discussing the prospect of the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company. *Apropos*, come and see me to-morrow at two; I have something of importance to talk over with you."

"I shall be at home at two, Lord Sark," I said, and I saw Mrs Clymer's face flush with anger as we passed on without allowing time for a reply. Mr Murkle for the rest of our ride was absorbed in a brown study, and I was only too glad to leave him in it.

It was therefore about the hour on the following day that Mr Murkle was having his interview with Mrs Clymer that I had the conversation with Lord Sark, which I also believe to have been "critical." I had long been thinking how to open his eyes to the dangers by which he was surrounded, and to release him from the bondage in which he was held, when the opportunity seemed thus providentially furnished, for I knew my mother was going to a concert; and at two o'clock, accordingly, Lord Sark made his appearance.

"You may think it strange of me," I said, "to ask you to call at an hour when I knew my mother would be out; but I have had to act so

much for myself through life, that perhaps I am less conventional than most girls, and this must also be my excuse for what I am going to say." I then explained to him, as shortly as I could, my theory about the crisis in our lives—about free-will and moral responsibility—about organic influences and the necessity of evolving the highest ideal conception of daily life, and then of trying to live up to it,—and justified my making a personal application of these theories to both of us by the strong conscientious conviction which I felt that it was my duty to do so, because I believed that every human being—even an unprotected and ignorant girl—might possess an influence which she might exercise for good. His mind had been so little trained to considerations of this nature, that he evidently followed me with difficulty; but he admitted that every individual exercised an influence of some sort or other; that it must be either for good or evil; and that they were responsible for it. So then I asked him what kind of influence Mrs Clymer was likely to exercise upon three pure girls, and whether he could justify having been the means of bringing her into contact with Stella Walton, Mattie Terrill, and myself. "So strongly do

I feel on this subject, Lord Sark," I went on, "that either she must go away, or we must. How it is to be managed, I don't clearly see; and this was my reason for asking you to come and discuss the matter with me."

"But, my dear Altiora," he said, looking stupefied with amazement, "Mrs Clymer is the most intimate friend of half the girls in London; their mothers make no objection to their intimacy with her. Society has accepted her without question; and I scarcely think you have a right to set yourself up against it. You have no proof that Mrs Clymer is not as virtuous as any other woman in London. In fact, her conduct is irreproachable. She is nothing more than a great friend of mine; and most pretty women who have lost their husbands, or are unhappily married, or whose husbands don't object, have great friends of the other sex. Life would be intolerable to them otherwise, poor things! but the intimacy need not necessarily be improper."

"I have nothing to do with London society, or its customs, or its standard of morality," I replied; "this is a special case. Stella Walton is my great friend. I have seen enough of you to feel the highest regard for you. I see what

your feeling for her is. It is neither doing justice to you nor to her that this woman should remain here. You cannot be her great friend without doing yourself an injury which must pass through you to others. You are under her spell, and as a spell-bound person you affect others hurtfully. You are charged, if I may so express myself, with a poisonous magnetism which you disseminate."

"That may all be true—it is somewhat beyond me," said Sark; "but granting it to be so, how is it to be remedied? I can't go, because I am attracted like a moth to a candle by Stella, with whom, as you have rightly divined, I have fallen deeply and passionately in love. Mrs Clymer will not go away, because she is determined, if possible, to prevent the match; and I can't make her, because, as you say, she has got me under some spell, which I can only resist in one point. She has been urging me to leave Paris, but here I am able to stand my ground."

"In other words, you're like one of those toy geese that follow magnets," I said, "only in this case there are two, and they pull with equal force in opposite directions. The result is that you are paralysed—that is why I say Mrs Clymer

must go away, and you would instantly gravitate in the right direction."

"I am sure Stella does not try to attract me," he gloomily replied, "for she is coldness itself; she seems entirely taken up with that fellow Murkle. I wonder what sort of magnetism his is?"

"As bad as Mrs Clymer's, only of another kind," I answered; "but you are mistaken if you think that Stella cares for him, though I confess her apparent encouragement of him is a mystery which I have in vain endeavoured to solve. But I am sure of this, if Mrs Clymer went away, her whole manner to you would change. It would not advance matters much if you went away with her, even if you could tear yourself from Stella. What I want to see is your emancipation from the whole connection. I can give you the best idea of your position by Mr Murkle's own description of it,—'with Mrs Clymer for an ally and the company for a trap, or Mrs Clymer for a trap and the company for an ally—it does not much matter which way you put it—I do not fear Lord Sark as a rival;' that was his way of expressing it, and I think it is one which deserves your serious consideration."

Sark bit his lip and tapped the floor with his

foot. "Believe me," I added, seeing that I was making an impression, "you are in as much danger materially as you are morally, and it is for your own sake as well as for ours that I want the atmosphere purified. Withdraw from the whole of this financial combination. I am sure that Stella cares for you; and though I don't want you to marry her for her fortune, the fact that she has one will relieve you from all further pecuniary anxieties."

"Dear Altiora," he said, "I feel the soundness of your advice; the unfortunate thing is that it is impossible for me to follow it. I am irrevocably committed to the financial scheme, to which I am both legally and honourably pledged. It is useless for me to attempt to drive Mrs Clymer away; and if I went away myself, she would simply have gained her point and follow me, and I should lose Stella, and fall back into the old bondage. There is a confession of weakness, but it is the truth. Believe me," he said, taking my hand, "I am none the less deeply grateful to you and ashamed of myself."

I had barely time to release my hand when the door opened and Mrs Clymer herself entered the room.

CHAPTER XI.

A PASSAGE OF ARMS.

SARK neither coloured nor started as Mrs Clymer, with a rapid and penetrating glance at both of us, advanced to greet me. I was conscious of doing both, and yet she read an expression of guilt on his honest countenance, while I am sure mine expressed nothing but indignation at her unceremonious entry. We must have presented an interesting study to an experienced physiognomist. I remember, although the moment was a critical one, trying to think by what feature the confusion which his face exhibited was chiefly betrayed. He did not lower his eyes as they met hers, the lines of the mouth did not move perceptibly as he rose slowly to follow up my greeting with his own, and yet there was a distinct admission in his face of a consciousness that

he was caught. I ask the inquiring mind, Where was it? By what mysterious agency does the countenance mirror the emotions, when the will holds every feature in an apparently normal calm? And how is it that the mirror is often a distorted one, and conveys an erroneous impression? Now I am certain it did in my own case. I was conscious of having done nothing to be ashamed of. I was angry, but not dismayed, at Mrs Clymer's sudden entrance, and yet I am sure that that lady utterly mistook the signs of my emotion, and attributed them to a sentiment which she supposed to be common to both Sark and myself. In fact, she was convinced that she had interrupted us at a moment when, as she imagined, some tender passages were being interchanged; and a certain triumphant and vindictive flash of her eye, as she squeezed my hand effusively, and then turned with easy and affectionate intimacy to her "dear Sark," warned me that the passages now in prospect were likely to prove anything but tender.

"I did not let the servant announce me, my dear Altiora," she said, knowing how it jarred upon me to be addressed by her by my Christian name, "because I knew your mother was out,

and heard you tell Sark yesterday that you were to be at home. That unpunctual Murkle came half an hour before his time because he had some meeting to attend, and so I was released sooner than I expected. I hope I have not indiscreetly interrupted an interesting *tête-à-tête*."

"Not at all," I calmly replied. "Your arrival would have been inconvenient a few moments ago; as it is, I have said everything to Lord Sark that I wished." And seeing that she was vainly attempting to suppress a nervous anxiety on the subject, I maliciously added—"He is quite satisfied,—are you not?" and I turned to him with a glance which I purposely intended should mislead my adversary, so full was it of a tender meaning.

The embarrassment into which it threw poor Sark, who was so taken aback that he could only stammer that he "never could be sufficiently grateful to me," evidently confirmed her worst suspicions. She lost her presence of mind under the pressure of her excitement, and said sharply, "Do you mean to tell me that you are engaged?"

I looked at her with an indignant glance of outraged propriety, and said, "I am not aware,

Mrs Clymer, of any circumstance which gives you the right to ask that question."

She apparently considered that the crisis warranted her in disregarding all social conventionality, or perhaps she felt her social position so strong that she could dare anything without danger from me, for she replied with the most unblushing effrontery, "Lord Sark is in a position to explain to you what the circumstance is which at all events gives me the right to ask *him* that question."

"I think," said Sark, overwhelmed with confusion, "that the subject is one which we had better not discuss further just now."

"On the contrary," she replied, "there could not be a more convenient or appropriate occasion. If Miss Peto intends to marry you, it is only right that she should be informed of the precise relations we occupy towards each other."

I confess I was staggered by the shamelessness of this remark. I had seen so little of society, that I did not know that such things could be possible. I rose quietly and touched the bell. "Mrs Clymer," I said, "if you do not leave the room instantly, I will have you turned out by the servants."

Sark sprang to his feet.

“ I implore you, Altiora,” he said, “ do not let us have a scandal. I shall never forgive myself for having been indirectly the cause of bringing this annoyance upon you ;” and then turning to Mrs Clymer, he added, “ You are labouring under a complete misapprehension. I am not engaged to be married to Miss Peto or to any one. Let us go now. I am sure that a moment’s calm reflection will lead you to regret the hasty conclusion you have arrived at, and the expression to which it gave rise.”

“ Miss Peto brought it upon herself,” said Mrs Clymer, rising as the servant entered ; and bowing with an air of outraged majesty, she left the room, followed by Sark, who had just time to press my hand and whisper, “ Once more forgive me, and don’t despise me utterly.”

A quarter of an hour after this, and while I was still brooding over the outrage to which I had been subjected, mamma and the Baron came home. I immediately told them what had occurred, and said it was impossible for me ever to meet Mrs Clymer again.

“ My dear Altiora,” said mamma, “ when you come to know a little more of life, you will see

how ridiculous such scruples are. I look upon Mrs Clymer's intimacy with your cousin as quite providential. I have been assiduously cultivating her friendship, because it will ensure us access into the very best society in London. Why, half the smart people bombard her with invitations, and the other half with requests to get them for them."

"But after what she has admitted to me, surely we could render that impossible," I said.

"In the first place, it would not be convenient to listen to you. In the second place, if we could expose her, which people in our position would utterly fail to do, you would, to use a vulgar expression, be simply cutting off your nose to spite your face. My dear, she may prove a most valuable and useful acquaintance and *chaperon*. Indeed I have already made arrangements for her to take you to a ball next Sunday week, to which she is going with Lord Sark, to be given by the celebrated author and play-writer, Monsieur Housseyn Arsaye, where you will see a little of Parisian life in its most brilliant and characteristic aspect. I am sure your American friends would like to go, and they could scarcely do so under better auspices. I shall insist, Altiora,

upon your not giving yourself airs of propriety in these matters. As your mother, I am responsible for your conduct, and I shall be quite satisfied to place you under Mrs Clymer's guidance. So you will have the goodness to immediately apologise for your rudeness. She may do us the greatest possible injury if we offend her. The idea of a chit like you flying in the face of a recognised beauty like Mrs Clymer, on the score of morality,—the thing is monstrous. Is it not, Baron?" she added, appealing to her husband.

"*Ma foi*, my little Ora, we must take things as we find them," he said, turning to me; "you and I can't afford to run atilt at social follies. We have been most fortunate in securing Lord Sark and Mrs Clymer as intimates, and no one would thank us except a few crabbed old ladies who want him for their daughters, for making a scandal; besides, dirt always sticks. You are the only authority on the subject; and a young lady who makes her *début* by attempting to expose a beautiful and popular woman, because she is too intimate with her own cousin, would certainly not come out under happy auspices. No, *Ora mia*, as your mother says, we must patch up this little difference, and be all the better friends

for it. If you can win Sark from her, no one will be better pleased than I shall be, but you have gone the wrong way to work, *ma petite*."

"I don't want to win Sark from her for myself, but for his own good," said I, indignantly; and I had much difficulty in preventing my feelings from finding vent in a flood of tears. "And," I added, rising to leave the room, while my voice trembled with excitement, "nothing shall induce me even to speak to Mrs Clymer again. You need not, therefore, expect me to apologise to her, much less to make my entry into London society under her auspices."

Thinking the matter over in my own room, I found that I had placed myself in a very difficult position. I knew the Baron and mamma well enough to feel certain that they would spare no pains to conciliate Mrs Clymer, and I knew that lady well enough to be equally sure that she would not lose the triumph of being conciliated, and of coming to the house hardened in her insolence by her success. My reserve would only make me look ridiculous, and she would not spare me. In my dilemma, I determined to go down and take counsel of my friends in the *entresol*; and thither I accordingly repaired, just in time

to find the two girls alone with Hannah at their afternoon tea.

“Well, that beats all,” said Hannah, when I had concluded my story without interruption. “I felt all through my bones that Clymer was a hard case the first time I sot eyes on her, but I didn’t jest know it went that length: but to think of your mama a-knowin’ it all, and wanting to git along in what she calls ‘society’ by sacrificing your innocence to her vice,—why, it’s enough to make a body’s hair stand on end.”

“The question now is,” I said, “what am I to do? How am I to escape the humiliation of her presence and of her triumph? And how, in the face of a command from my parents to the contrary, am I to preserve my own self-respect? I heard Mr MacAlpine and Mr Hetherington talking the other night about the ball she wishes me to go to, and nothing will induce me to go, particularly under the escort of Sark and Mrs Clymer.”

“You must jest run away from ’em, my dearie,” said Hannah, with the greatest coolness imaginable. “There is times when your dooty to your God is greater than your dooty to your

parents, 'specially when one of 'em is only a Eitalian, and a step-father at that."

This proposition was so unexpected that it quite took my breath away, but it was received by the two girls with rapturous approbation.

"Why, that's splendid, you dear old Hannah; she shall run away to us. We'll all 'vamosse the camp,' as the boys say out West, in the night, and not leave a sign for them to follow us by," said Stella, clapping her hands.

"Yes," said Mattie, "we'll just leave a line behind to say that we are very sorry, but we had to do it because we found our Californian morals were getting contaminated by the best society we tumbled into on our arrival in the Old World, and we took the liberty of carrying off a little innocent that hadn't been corrupted, with us."

"Now, then, the question is," said Stella, with a promptitude worthy of a great general, "to decide upon the plan of operations. When do you think Mrs Clymer will be sufficiently reconciled to make an appearance again?"

"Oh, certainly not before to-morrow afternoon," I said.

"Well, then, we'll both go up-stairs. You go into your own room, which you may be supposed

never to have left. I will go and see the Baroness, and tell her we are going to spend three or four days visiting Versailles and St Germain, and I'll ask her to let you come with us. This she is likely to do, as she will imagine it will give you time to get over your anger with Mrs Clymer, and give her time to conciliate that lady. Then I will ask to see you, and you will come down, innocent of the whole affair, and accept my invitation; then you'll pack up enough things to last—not for a week, but for a year if necessary; besides, we can always buy more. We will make all the preparations to-night, and all start for Versailles the first thing in the morning, and then decide where to fly to next.”

“And Bob?” said Mattie; “do you suppose I can tear myself away from my Zend-Avesta in this unpremeditated manner? No; Bob must be in the secret. We must consult Bob at once. I will telegraph for him to come here instantly.”

“But won't Keith Hetherington suspect?” I remarked. “Don't you think we had better consult him too?”

“We'll telegraph for both,” said Stella, “to come here and dine; and you can dine too, Altiora. I will ask you up-stairs. Now there

is no time to be lost; but first," said the girl, stopping in her enthusiasm, and turning to Hannah, "tell us if you approve; we'll none of us move a step without your approval."

"If I didn't approve, I'd a said so," remarked the old lady. "When it comes to running away in such a good cause as this, you'll find old Hannah making tracks with the youngest of ye; but I ain't a-going to let that Clymer drop—do you know it? If I don't make her run too before I've done with her, I ain't one of the New Hampshire Coffins. She has got to be put down, and she's got to stay put. It's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it."

The first part of the programme was carried out without a hitch. And the same evening, while Mattie was initiating Bob into his duties, I was having a serious conversation with Keith Hetherington on the subject.

In spite of the intimacy which had sprung up between us during the past month, I had not been able to assume the cousinly privilege which my American friends had so rapidly availed themselves of, of calling Mr Hetherington by his Christian name; but the more I saw of him, the more I was struck by the breadth and origin-

ality of his views upon the subjects in which I was especially interested, but in regard to which, upon ordinary occasions, he manifested the utmost silence and reserve, feeling either that he was liable to be misunderstood, or that they were of too serious a character to be treated lightly. Indeed he often seemed to have two different lives—an outer and an inner one; one which he lived for his friends and for society, and one which he lived for himself. No one who judged of him by his ordinary conversation could form an accurate estimate of the earnestness of his character, and of the wide range of those faculties with which he was endowed, and which, aided by extensive research, travel, keen powers of observation, and study of his fellow-men and the phenomena of nature, had enabled him to arrive at certain results which he was reluctant to impart to others, because, while convinced of their truth, he had not arrived at the point where they could be verified by evidence which should be satisfactory to the world at large. Hence he guarded them jealously under the mask of a very commonplace exterior. Notwithstanding this, there was an indescribable something about him which had from the first piqued my curiosity, and the interest which I

manifested in a certain class of inquiry had finally induced him, so far as I was concerned, in a great measure to break through his reserve. It was the sympathy of thought and feeling which had thus become engendered, that seemed to make it impossible for me to take so serious a step as the one I was now contemplating, without first consulting him, and yet it involved an explanation that could not fail to be more or less embarrassing. I was aware that the somewhat bold and unusual measure I had resorted to in arranging a private interview with Sark, in order to detach him from Mrs Clymer, was liable to misconstruction, and that the position in which I was now placed by that lady implied that I was a rival with her in my cousin's affections; while the plan of flying from her and from my parents and natural guardians was one which, from a conventional point of view, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to justify; moreover, to take into my confidence a young unmarried man, whom I had not known above a month, even though he was twelve or fourteen years older than myself, and make a sort of father-confessor of him, which I felt strongly impelled to do, was to place us in an entirely

new position relatively to each other, and to establish an intimacy on such peculiar grounds, as nothing but the utmost confidence in the justness of his appreciation of my motives and the rectitude of his character would have warranted. In spite of the affectionate sympathy of my impulsive American friends, I felt forlorn and desolate. I wanted a matured masculine judgment to lean upon in this emergency, and whom had I to turn to but him? Still it was not without a sense of the greatest embarrassment and hesitation that I described to him my interview with Sark, the motives by which it was prompted, its interruption by Mrs Clymer, and the outrage to which I had been subjected by her, and my mother's intentions with regard to her chaperonage of me in London; and without telling him the plan I had decided upon, I asked him what course he would advise me to pursue under the circumstances. "Excuse me, Mr Hetherington," I said in conclusion, "for taking you so deeply into my confidence, and placing you in a position of so much responsibility, what I really need is not social or worldly but spiritual advice. I suppose a clergyman would be considered the right person to go to, but

I don't know one ; besides, I heard Mrs Clymer, who is a very regular attendant at church, say the other day that she found them such a comfort. She said there was one she always went to in her difficulties. They differ, it seems to me, just as much as other men, and they might think themselves bound by some text like 'honour thy father and thy mother,' which I am sure would not apply in a case like this."

"You must have been in difficulties before," he replied, "though not so serious ; what do you generally do ?"

"Oh, I always try and think what papa, who, when he gave me my name, gave me the motto of my life, is at this moment wishing me to do under the circumstances. I try and imagine the highest conception of duty, and earnestly seek for his influence to descend and point it out to me ; and indeed a good influence does seem to descend, and I seem to feel it encompassing me, but unfortunately it does not appear to be governed by any social considerations, and sometimes suggests the most impossible courses of action from the worldly point of view. That is one reason why I have shrunk from going to clergymen—they appear to try and adapt their

religion to the social requirements of the conditions by which they are surrounded, instead of going for the right and highest thing *coûte que coûte*. It is all a matter of compromise, and I hate compromise where it involves the slightest sacrifice of the highest ideal conception of duty."

"But there may be one high ideal conception of duty to God and to humanity, and another to one's self, or to one's country, or family, or society; it all depends whom the duty is towards, whether it is likely to involve compromise or not. Now the ideal conception of duty towards one's country is a very high one."

"Yes; but surely not so high as towards humanity at large," I replied.

"That was just the reason I refused a seat in Parliament when it was offered to me," he answered, with a smile. "I found that the popular conception of one's duty to one's country involved a compromise which I could not make with that which I felt I owed to humanity. If you feel the same with regard to your family, or to society, you have only one course to pursue."

"But I am not a Romanist, and I can't become a nun. I can't leave them, for I have nowhere to go to."

“And if you could, you would not advance matters. You would do no good to the world by leaving it. This is the great mistake of ascetics—who are, in fact, more occupied with their own spiritual welfare than with that of their fellow-men—not perceiving the fatal egotism that underlies all efforts after personal salvation.”

“But I am not thinking about my personal salvation now,” I said, “I am thinking simply of somehow fulfilling the conception of my duty to God, which you tell me admits of no compromise with the conventional idea of my duty to my family.”

“One greater than I said that,” Mr Hetherington interrupted, in a tone of deep solemnity, “when he described how His cross should be borne.”

“But how is a girl under age like me to leave father and mother and house?” said I, knowing to what he alluded. “In the Christian society in which we live I should be answerable to the law,” I added bitterly, “and if I persisted in my rebellion, should be put into Chancery or some such thing, because I was trying to fulfil a divine command.”

A long pause ensued, during which Mr Hetherington put his elbows on the table, and his face between his hands, remaining in that attitude for some moments.

“My child,” he said at last, “there is a way which sets every pulse in my being throbbing when I think of it—for it is one which, if you consented to it, would bring inexpressible happiness and consolation to a spirit that has suffered for many years the misery of utter isolation and desolation—but it is not open to us yet. I cannot ask you to become my wife merely because it would make my life a joy, and enable you to escape from a dilemma. Not because I fear the law, or would shrink from carrying you away from its clutches, but because in this matter we must be a law unto ourselves, and because marriage is too sacred a state to be entered upon either from motives of natural selfishness or expediency. Not only is it true in a deeper sense than the world wots of that marriages are made in heaven, but the time when they should be consummated here is registered there, and for us that time may never come. I know of only one person who can assist us in this difficulty, and she is not far off,” he

said, glancing from the corner in which we were sitting to Hannah, who was engaged at the other end of the room in the unusual task for her of writing a letter.

“Oh,” I said, clasping my hands, not a little relieved from the emotion into which this singular speech had thrown me, “I am so glad you have arrived at that conclusion at last! I only felt that this conversation was necessary in order to prepare you for what I have arranged with Hannah, only I somehow felt I wanted your sanction to it.” And then I told him our plans, and as I saw that Hannah was by this time directing the envelope, I called her. She came to us with the letter in her hand; as she laid it upon the table my eye fell upon the address.

“Why, Hannah,” I said, thunderstruck, for I could scarcely believe my eyes, “who have you been writing to?”

“Mr Clymer,” she replied calmly.

CHAPTER XII.

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT.

ON the following morning the three girls and Hannah, attended by Hetherington and Alderney as escort, started for Versailles, and the same afternoon the Baroness called on Mrs Clymer, to pacify the outraged sensibilities of that lady. She found Lord Sark with her,* which rendered the explanation somewhat embarrassing.

“You can’t think, my dear Mrs Clymer,” she said, “how distressed I was on hearing from Al-tiora of her foolish conduct yesterday. I could not lose a moment in coming to ask you to forgive her for her presumption. I can’t think where the child has picked up all her ridiculous ideas. I hope, dear Lord Sark, you will make allowances for what must have seemed to you most unmaidenly and indelicate behaviour on

her part, and that it will not affect our pleasant relations together. I have sent the child away with her American friends to spend a few days at Versailles and St Germain, and by the time she comes back I shall take care to put matters on such a footing, that any recurrence of such conduct shall be impossible."

Lord Sark was about to speak, but Mrs Clymer was too well aware of the danger of allowing any deprecatory utterances on his part to give him time. At the same time, she perceived that her only chance of keeping him quiet was to adopt an attitude very different from that which she would probably have assumed had she been alone with the Baroness, and in a position to ride her high horse unchecked. So to Sark's astonishment she replied—

"I am so sorry you have taken the trouble to call, dear. I assure you the apologies, if there are any due, should rather come from Sark, who has a way of talking to girls as if they were women of the world, which is quite shocking. Poor dear girl! no wonder she was startled. At her age I should have acted just in the same way. I tried to disabuse her mind of some erroneous impressions, which, I am afraid, she has received

now in reference to our old friendship," and she extended her hand with the most engaging frankness to Sark, who evidently took it with reluctance; "but you, dear Baroness, who know the world so well, and know what sad injustices we married women with wicked husbands have to endure, understand how harmless such intimacies are, and how desolate life would be if Plato had not invented attachments of that sweet and sympathetic character by which we are bound."

Mrs Clymer was, in fact, not sorry for this opportunity of letting the Baroness comprehend that she had no intention of giving up Lord Sark to Altiora, and that, if she expected her help in London, it must be upon those terms. So she went on: "A month of the London season under my chaperonage will be quite enough to enlighten your daughter upon matters of which she is so utterly ignorant, as she proved herself to be yesterday. Her beauty, talent, and relationship to Sark, added to my humble efforts and the Baron's great financial position, will, I am sure, secure her a brilliant social triumph."

Lord Sark's face was a study during this speech. The notion of the girl, of whose pure and disinterested nature he had received such striking

evidence, being introduced into London society by the woman whose reputation in it he had himself done more than any one to compromise, and whose real character, now that she presented it to him in the light of his innocent cousin's *chaperon*, began to assume a totally new aspect, filled him with a mingled sentiment of remorse and dismay. In the degree in which the grandeur and purity of Altiora's mind had made their influences felt, and disturbed the latent sensibilities of his conscience, had he become more keenly alive to the contrast which was presented to it by the perverted nature of the woman to whose fascinations he had fallen a victim. And the more that this counter-influence seemed to invade his organism, did he shrink from the chains which he had hugged, and begin within himself to devise schemes for releasing himself, and for thwarting those plans of his late charmer, to which the unworthy mother was listening with so much complacency.

In pursuance of the resolution slowly forming within him, he asked the Baroness if she knew whether the party were to be found at that moment at Versailles or St Germain; but Madame Grandesella said, as she expected them back in

three or four days at the most, she had not made any special inquiries as to their plans; and Mrs Clymer suggested, with a suspicion of a sneer, that the surest way to find them would be to go to both. So his lordship, to that lady's surprise and disgust, then and there took his leave, glad to escape at a moment when the Baroness's presence would make any opposition difficult.

By the time Lord Sark reached the Hotel des Réservoirs at Versailles, it was already evening, and his inquiries turning out fruitless, he resolved to drive on to St Germain after a hasty meal; but to his surprise and consternation he could find no trace of them there; and as it had now become too late to return to Paris, here he was forced to remain until early the following morning, when he went back to Paris to ask the *concierge* whether the young ladies had left any address. Here he heard that on the previous afternoon his cousin, Bob Alderney, had appeared with Miss Coffin, had made arrangements for giving up the apartments altogether, had paid off the servants, had packed up everything that belonged to them, and the *concierge* had heard the direction given—"Gare du Chemin de fer du Nord;" on which—without making inquiries of the Grandesellas,

which he felt would be useless, or giving them the alarm, which he began to suspect would be treacherous—he drove off to the apartment occupied by Hetherington and Alderney. The former had just gone out; the latter had not been at home since the previous evening, nor did the servant know anything of his movements, beyond the fact that he had taken a small portmanteau with him. The chase upon which Sark had been engaged for nearly twenty-four hours, now began to pique his curiosity, and to interest him intensely,—the more especially, as he strongly suspected that before long he would be the pursued as well as the pursuer. In the midst of his eagerness and anxiety, he could not help smiling as the tableau presented itself to his mind—of his hunting Stella and Altiora, of Mrs Clymer hunting him, and of the Grandesellas hunting the whole party. He rushed to his hotel to pack a few necessaries, wondering as he did so at the positive delight that he felt at the opportunity which seemed thus providentially offered of making his escape; at the utter absence of any sentiment for Mrs Clymer strong enough to hold him; at the constant presence of Stella in his mind, fluttering like an *ignis fatuus* from his gaze, at the

very moment that existence seemed impossible without her; at the deep brotherly affection which had grown up within him for Altiora—a sentiment which, for force of purity, he had not given his nature credit for entertaining. A whirl of pleasurable emotions seemed to have taken possession of him, as he rapidly sped up the Rue Lafayette in his *coupé*. He pictured to himself a retreat in which he would find the girls hidden away, with Altiora to plead for him, and no Murkle to balk him in his suit; and he conjured up to himself the spectacle, with a satisfaction which he felt was heartless, of Mrs Clymer's fury at finding that he had flown, no one knew whither; he had left word with his servant that he would probably not be away long, and to wait till he returned, which would still further embarrass his fair friend, who would probably make the fruitless journey that he had done to Versailles and St Germain.

The only unpleasant reflection which arose to mar the full enjoyment of the situation, was the uncertainty that attended his own pursuit. The inquiries which he made at the station, left no doubt that he was on the right track. The previous evening, three young ladies and an old one,

attended by a young Englishman, had gone by the express to London ; and he found himself just in time to take the tidal, so that he would be in that city within a little more than twelve hours after them—and he felt no doubt that Bob, not expecting such a rapid pursuit, might be heard of at his club. Such, in fact, proved the case. There, a little before midnight, he came suddenly upon his unsuspecting cousin, deeply immersed in the study of Bradshaw.

Bob, though he endeavoured to assume an air of unconscious innocence, was evidently not a little disconcerted at Sark's appearance on the scene.

“ Oh, lucky champion of distressed damsels, are you hunting up the train which will most speedily convey them to the retreat you have selected for them ? ” said his lordship, who was so delighted with his good fortune, that he vented his sense of it in chaff. “ To such a knight-errant, Bradshaw becomes an idyl more sweet than the lay of any troubadour, and Pall Mall a scene of adventure which the Knight of La Mancha himself might have envied. But you must take me as your Sancho Panza, Bob. I am not going to be denied in this matter. I will follow you as a de-

voted squire to the ends of the earth in the defence of the pure and the unprotected from the perils of nineteenth-century civilisation. Only tell me that our interests do not clash, and that the fair Hannah is not the Dulcinea of your affections."

"Before I answer a question," replied Bob, sturdily, "answer me one—Where is the Clymer?"

"At this moment, I should say she was walking up and down her bedroom in Paris in a dressing-gown, half blind with fury, having just discovered my flight, and that she will start by the first train to-morrow morning to Versailles and St Germain to look for me. I purposely put her off the scent in order to give us time. Is this proof sufficient of my fidelity?"

"It is impossible for me to reveal their whereabouts to you before I consult the girls themselves," said Bob. "Let us see," and he turned to Bradshaw—"we ought to be off by the 1.40 at latest; meet me here to-morrow at 11, and I will tell you their decision. There is not another man in the world, except Hetherington, whom I would treat in this matter as I do you, old fellow; but then I have my suspicions of your real motives, and I am glad to have them. I know you

would not have acted as you have done, except as a true friend.

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“Why, certainly, yes, indeed,” said Mattie Terrill, enthusiastically, when Bob asked her on the following morning whether the girls would receive a visit from his cousin. “Just think of our having already made a distinguished member of the British peerage hunt us all the way from Paris—and then you talk about your aristocracy being quite too awfully aw-aw-kind of fellows. Why, I guess no old trapper would have followed our trail more cunningly. Bring him by all means. In the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom, and he has won the right of being admitted into our confidence by the trouble he has taken to prove it. Don’t you think so?” she said, turning to Altiora and Stella—neither of whom, however, responded with the enthusiasm which she expected, though it was evident that the Earl’s eagerness to find them was a source of quiet gratification to both. As Hannah gave her cordial adhesion, the matter was settled; and two hours afterwards Lord Sark was in the house, in a quiet Tyburnian region, where Bob had secured them lodgings.

“The problem has been solved more rapidly than we either of us expected when we last met,” said Altiora, meeting him cordially, while Stella advanced with a slight hesitation, and a perceptible heightening of colour, very foreign to her usual reckless manner, or the frigid reserve with which she had hitherto treated him. Lord Sark felt a delightful and exhilarating complacency stealing over him as he thus found himself accepted without question as an ally against the machinations of the Clymer, which, considering his relations with her, surprised himself. He contrasted the agitating condition under which his former passion had been stimulated, with the more wholesome influences under which he was now acting, and mentally resolved to preserve the liberty that he had thus won, almost in spite of himself. A veil seemed to be lifting from an inner sanctuary, and revealing to him unknown and unsuspected possibilities of emotion; and as it did so, the contrast that this presented to those of which he had been the victim, struck him with its full force. He perceived that in the passion which he had felt for the siren who had enthralled him, love, as he now began to understand its nature, had no place,

and in the reaction of the discovery he was conscious of a sensation very nearly approaching to disgust.

“I guess, lord,” said Hannah, whose eye he caught while thus reflecting, “that you feel a deal better inside of ye than when I saw you last.” Hannah always called Lord Sark simply “lord,” having apparently a conscientious scruple against calling him “my lord.” Nevertheless, in his absence, she always talked of him as “the lord,”—being a person who never wasted words where abbreviation was possible, she had at an early period dispensed with “Sark.” Indeed she had a nomenclature peculiar to herself, both for her friends and her enemies. Murkle was always spoken of by her as “that Murkle,” with a world of contempt thrown into *that*; and when she addressed him to his face, which was as rarely as possible, it was generally as “Mister;” but she had never forgiven his conduct about the trunk, and often simply attracted his attention, by saying “Hyar;” and once in offering him a cup of tea at a moment when he was making ostentatious love to Stella, to her intense indignation, she called out to him, “Hi, you there!” as if she was hailing a cab. Mrs Clymer, for

some reason known only to herself, and which she would never divulge, she never talked of except as that "Valparaiso baggage," and addressed her to her face as "Missus." She had never been heard to add the word Clymer. Hetherington had soon been adopted as Keith, and then as Keithy; and Bob had so much advanced in her affections since he had aided in their flight, that he too was now promoted, to his great delight, to being Bobby. There was this remarkable thing about Hannah, that she managed to convey in the tones of her voice, and in the manner of her address, a most exact reflection of her inmost sentiments in regard to the person to whom she was speaking at the moment; and Sark, who knew her peculiarities, felt an underlying tenderness in the uncouth remark, which described so exactly what he was feeling, that it called out a burst of effusiveness, which astonished the whole party. He could not give vent to the emotions that were welling up within him by embracing Stella, Altiora, and Mattie, one after the other, which would have been a natural outlet to his feelings—so he jumped up, and crossing to Hannah, took both her hands, as the only reply he could make to her speech, and shook

them violently. "Well, well, lordy," she remarked, gazing at him benignly, "you've got the right stuff in you; guess you ain't got far to go before you'll come all right." And ever after this Lord Sark was distinguished by the terminal *y*, which was a certain evidence that he had become a favourite.

"We must not lose any time, if we are to tell Sark our plans," said Bob.

He then explained that a retreat had been secured by his efforts in a quiet, remote village, to which he fondly anticipated that it would be difficult to track them; that Hetherington was in the secret, and had been left in Paris to keep them informed of the movements of the Grandesellas and Mrs Clymer; and that the girls were quite reconciled to the experience in store for them of a quiet rural life in a secluded and beautiful part of England. Lord Sark suggested that this might not prove necessary, unless the girls absolutely wished it, and that he could get them all invited to Beaucourt Castle, the seat of his uncle by his mother's side, the Duke of Beaucourt; and he maintained that Altiora would be as safe from intrusion or molestation there as in her undiscovered seclusion, as the Grandesellas

would be too much overawed by the grandeur of her retreat to attempt either to pursue her or to extract her from it. Altiora, however, shrank from the possible notoriety which might thus attach to her escapade, from the explanations which might be involved, and from the sudden plunge which it would necessitate into the midst of an unknown world of aristocratic fashion. The Californian girls had no such hesitation, and any reluctance they manifested to accept Lord Sark's offer arose solely from their disinclination to abandon the refugee who had fled to them for protection; but this point was decided by Hannah, who could under no circumstances be induced, so far as she was concerned, to entertain the Beaucourt Castle project; and it was therefore finally settled that they should all go to Copleydale together, under Bob's guidance, and wait there in secrecy, until Sark had obtained the invitation from his aunt for the two American girls. As Hetherington had declared his intention of coming over to England as soon as the Grandesellas and Mrs Clymer started in pursuit, Bob suggested that he should be directed to mount guard over Hannah and Altiora—a function he felt sure he would readily undertake—

and proposed himself to sue for an invitation to Beaucourt; and as he threw out this hint, he looked for approval from Mattie Terrill. But that young lady seemed in a perverse mood, and declared that she wanted to flirt with English lords, and he would interfere with her and idle away his time, which he had much better spend in taking the steps necessary for his initiation into his new career as a stockbroker—an announcement which struck Lord Sark with astonishment; but there was no time to ask any explanation of it then, and an hour afterwards he was standing on the platform at the Paddington terminus, waving his adieux to two lovely creatures kissing their hands to him out of the windows of the carriage of a vanishing express train, much to the envy of the surrounding spectators. The same afternoon he wrote to the Duchess of Beaucourt, asking if she had room for him at the Castle.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DUCHESS OF BEAUCOURT.

“SAPRISTI, ce n'est toujours pas le mari qu'on cherche comme ça,” said the waiter of the Hotel Henri Quatre at St Germain, after he handed Mrs Clymer into a *fiacre* and was watching its retreating wheels—a sentiment suggested to his experience in such matters by the ill-suppressed evidences of anger and anxiety exhibited by that lady, after she had drawn the coverts of Versailles and St Germain in search of the missing party in vain. She had time enough, however, to compose her feelings and her *rôle* before she arrived at the apartments of the Grandesellas with the tidings. She affected to be intensely amused by the whole performance. It was “so like dear Sark to enter into the spirit of a joke concocted by two wild Californian girls, utterly ignorant of all the *convenances* of civilised life, and capable

of outraging all rules of propriety. They had no social reputation to lose; but her real concern was for dear Altiora, whose innocence had been betrayed, and whose character had been compromised, poor girl, by her reckless friends: it was very sad." And she composed her features to a becoming condition of gravity and sympathy, and turned appealingly to Murkle, who happened to be present, and invited him to suggest what course should be adopted in so unexpected an emergency.

"We had better find out from the *concierge*," said that worthy, "when he expects them back again: they may have changed their minds and gone to Fontainebleau." And he left the room, while the Baroness protested that Altiora would never dream of prolonging her absence beyond the time originally specified. But Murkle came back with the appalling intelligence that the party in the *entresol* had paid off their servants and given up the apartment, and left a letter, which was to be given to the Baroness at the expiration of three days; but "as monsieur had made inquiries, he would give it to him at once." And as it was addressed to the Baroness, Murkle handed it to her, and she read as follows:—

“DEAR BARONESS,—We find that we are altogether too unsophisticated, without further preparation, to stand the wear and tear of Parisian existence under the conditions presented to us. That native innocence which is so marked a characteristic of the girlhood of the Pacific slope cannot bear the moral strain. We feel we want toughening all over, and we have decided to go into seclusion in England to toughen. We have taken dear Altiora with us, for she has as pure a nature as if she had been born at Cedar Buttes, and we cannot bear to see it spoiled. She tried hard, dear girl, to write you a line for me to enclose in this, but her feelings were too much for her.—With kind regards to the Baron and Mr Murkle, amicably your friend,

STELLA WALTON.

“*P.S.*—You will see from this that it will be quite impossible for any of us to go with Lord Sark and Mrs Clymer to the ball on Sunday.”

“If the girlhood of the Pacific slope are half as innocent as they are insolent,” said the Baroness, with a snort of indignation, “they must be truly exceptional in that respect. ‘Amicably your friend,’ indeed!”

“ Sark had a most important meeting to attend to-day. He has guaranteed the transfer of the property of the company of which he was chairman, and the final papers were to have been signed. He is so far compromised, that if he attempts to back out now, we can ruin him morally and financially,” said Murkle, who was filled with rage at the prospect of losing the heiress to the man whose rank he had intended to turn to his own pecuniary and social advantage, while there was a still further possibility of Altiora escaping from his clutches.

“ Bah, *caro mio!*” said the Baron; “ there is nothing to make a fuss about. They are a pack of children whom we can soon bring to their senses. Fortunately the whole matter is arranged so far as our French colleagues are concerned. We have nothing for it but to follow the fugitives to England, and change the base of our operations. We shall soon find out where they are; they are too distinguished a party to be lost. *Allons, Lalla mia!* Pack up; we must be off by to-night’s train. Will you allow us to offer you our escort?” he added, turning to Mrs Clymer.

That lady, who had assumed an air of great indifference, at first refused, on the ground that

she hated these sudden moves, but allowed herself to be finally persuaded by Murkle to join the party; and the same night they were all *en route* for London.

The following day was not far advanced before Sark received a missive from Mrs Clymer, informing him of her arrival in town, and requesting him to call upon her immediately. "If anybody calls, tell the servant to say I am out of town, and leave orders that all letters are to be kept to await my return; and put up things enough for a week as quickly as possible," said his lordship to his valet, as he tossed the Clymer's letter into the fire, evidently with no intention of answering it. He was, in fact, expected at Beaucourt Castle that afternoon. As the Duchess was a woman of large sympathies, possessed a generous nature, had been devotedly attached to her nephew from his boyhood, and had been sincerely pained by the infatuation which had for the last few years taken possession of him, to the exclusion of those public interests to which she had expected him to devote his talents, she was only too delighted to co-operate in any schemes that might wean him back to the life she longed to see him lead. She made rather a wry face when she

found he had substituted a Californian heiress for the cosmopolitan adventuress, and plaintively objected that he would have done better to look among the countrywomen of his own class, instead of running the risk of transferring his affections from one American to another. However, she consented to invite the two girls, and to *chaperon* them herself—if, on inspection, she found they were presentable; if not, she stipulated beforehand that Sark was somehow or other to get rid of them in twenty-four hours. “It is amazing,” she said, “the way in which society is being taken by storm by our transatlantic cousins. It is enough if they have pretty faces and fortunes, and are Americans, to ensure them the *entrée* into houses from which Englishwomen, just as rich, just as pretty, and far better born, are jealously excluded.”

“If I were a middle-class Englishman, a railway contractor, or a cable company promoter, or a cotton-spinner, or a chap of that sort, you know, who had made some money, and wanted to get my wife and family into society, do you know what I would do?” said Lord Grandchamp, the Duke’s eldest son. “I should take my wife and girls to America, and live there long enough

to enable me to become an American citizen, and my girls to pick up New York manners,—they are much better than those of our middle-class—a sort of French *chic* about them, you know, with a free-and-easy originality added,—and then I'd send them over by themselves, without letting them tell anybody who they were, except that they were the daughters of a wealthy American, who had millions of dollars, you know; and then, when they had both married fellows like Sark here, I'd turn up myself, and he'd find to his astonishment that he had a regular vulgar Britisher for his father-in-law, and a mother-in-law with a great red shawl, and big feet, and no *h*'s. What a sell it would be!—and richly he'd deserve it. How do you know," he added, turning to Sark, "that this girl Stella Walton is not the daughter of old Welton, our head-gardener, who emigrated twenty years ago to America and made a fortune there? It only needs the change of a letter."

"Well, we ought to be grateful to a country whose institutions give us a chance of meeting upon equal terms with our gardeners' daughters, when they have developed a refinement and qualities of their own which make them desir-

able additions to our *blasé* society. It acts upon my moral epidermis very much as effervescing salts put into my bathing water do upon my skin. I feel internally refreshed and invigorated."

"Well, Sark," said the Duchess, laughing, "it's a pity you should monopolise the enjoyment of these sensations, so I will take your American friends on trust, and see what effect they produce upon my other visitors—so that matter is settled. Now tell me where I am to direct to them."

"Oh, that does not matter," he said; "give the letter to me and I will send it to them. But perhaps I had better tell you the whole story—only mind, Grandchamp, it is in the strictest confidence, so don't go retailing it all over the clubs." And Sark gave the Duchess an account of the Grandesellas, and of his newly found cousin Altiora, which interested her so much that her heart warmed to the friendless girl, and she proposed to include her in the invitation. The fact that Sark had already made this suggestion to Altiora, and that she had shrunk from entering the world, even under the ducal auspices, only raised Altiora in the Duchess's good opinion,

and she made a mental resolution to befriend her should opportunity offer.

In the middle of their conversation the post arrived with a note from Bob Alderney, also proposing a visit.

“Why,” asked the Duchess, “what can induce the dear boy to tear himself from his beloved oriental studies and his bosom friend in Paris, to offer a visit here? I am sure I shall only be too delighted to see him. I ask him regularly every season, and he as regularly refuses. He writes from some place in Devonshire.”

“Perhaps he is after the other Californian girl,” said Grandchamp, acutely.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said Sark, with a smile. “However, aunt, you’ll grant his request, I hope, and then you’ll have an opportunity of judging for yourself.”

That evening the post carried two letters, both addressed to Copleydale—one from the Duchess to Bob Alderney, and the other from Sark to Stella, enclosing an invitation for herself and Mattie to Beaucourt.

“That will do capitally,” said Sark to himself. “Bob can escort them here, and I will wait to receive them. It is lucky that the Duchess is

going to have a houseful of people ; it will give them some idea of life in an English country house."

The Duchess of Beaucourt was a good-natured easy-going woman of the world, by no means disposed to take a strait-laced view of its shortcomings, and always ready to make allowances for those irregularities which, to her mind, gave a decided piquancy to society. She had regretted Sark's devotion to the Clymer, not so much because it was wrong in itself, as because it interfered with his worldly prospects. She had been a beautiful and dashing woman in her youth ; and more than once, had she been Mrs Smith instead of a duchess, her social position would have been seriously compromised by sundry *affaires de cœur*, for which, however, allowances were made, partly because the Duke, who was as popular among women as she was among men, utterly ignored any consciousness of his wife's flirtations, and the cordial understanding which seemed to exist between them was never disturbed by their intimacy with members of the opposite sexes—and partly because people said she dispensed her favours out of sheer amiability and good-nature, and that it was rather under

the influence of a lavish generosity of character than of any essentially improper tendencies that she allowed enterprising admirers to compromise her by their attentions. Besides, people made allowances for a pardonable vanity in a woman of such great personal attractions. It is doubtful, however, whether they would have been so lenient had she not been a duchess, with a charming place in the country, one of the principal attractions of which consisted in the fact that she understood exactly how to select her guests, which she divided into appropriate categories. Thus she generally opened her autumn parties with groups of distinguished politicians. As the Duke had never taken an active part in politics, and as both he and the Duchess were people of wide sympathies, Cabinet ministers and leading politicians of all shades met here on a sort of neutral ground; then, as talent was to be encouraged, and clever men were more or less lions, and agreeable additions to the aristocracy, these gatherings were pleasantly flavoured with artists, philosophers, authors, with a celebrated traveller or distinguished foreigner thrown in. Thus science, politics, art, and literature were skilfully mingled; and for people who were not

very dependent for their amusement on a brilliant display of feminine wit and beauty, went off successfully. For the wives of the statesmen and politicians were generally elderly and more or less dull, their daughters too correct in their behaviour to be amusing, and the philosophers, artists, and authors were generally either bachelors, or, if they had wives, left them at home. Then there were one or two parties of county people, with perhaps a bishop, and sundry London people the reverse of smart, who, for some reason or other, had claims upon the ducal hospitality. When these had all been disposed of, and the time came for the shooting-parties, the fun of the festivities might be said to begin. Then came the turn of the beauties, more or less fast and professional, and of the girls whose mammas were too anxious to get them well married to care whom they met, particularly when the meeting-place was Beaucourt Castle; and of the smart young men about town, some of whom were most desirable eldest sons; and of old *roués* who had known the Duchess in her youth, and whom she now invited out of sheer good-nature, because she knew that it warmed up their battered old hearts to be surrounded by a lot of pretty women,

whose flirtations they superintended in a fatherly sort of way, which carried with it its own privileges; besides which, there was always an old dowager or two of questionable notoriety and great social distinction, whose early experiences had not been altogether unmixed with those of the old *roués*, and with whom, therefore, a certain tenderness of relation still existed as they reverted sentimentally to those episodes of years gone by, and morally festooned their *immortelles* over the sacred season of their youth.

It was to meet a houseful thus selected that Sark despatched the invitation to the two girls at Copleydale, with no little inward enjoyment of the treat in store for them; for he was too much accustomed to such society to think it anything but delightful, though he could not but own, as he looked through the list of guests furnished him by his aunt, that it was just as well that Altiora was not to be of the party.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEAUCOURT CASTLE.

MRS CLYMER, unable to restrain her impatience, when, after she had allowed a sufficient interval to elapse, Sark did not make his appearance, drove off herself to Grosvenor Square, to make personal inquiries, and arrived there a few moments after he had taken his departure; but the servants were too discreet to hazard any conjecture as to the direction his lordship had taken. This uncertainty, however, in the case of so prominent a member of the aristocracy, could not last long, when such experienced sleuth-hounds as Baron Grandesella and Mr Murkle were on the scent; and on the following morning the latter arrived at Mrs Clymer's "bijou residence," with the intelligence that his lordship was staying at Beaucourt, but that, although they were on the track of Alderney, they had not yet been able to dis-

cover his whereabouts or that of the girls. It had been decided by the Grandesellas that the whole episode might be turned to valuable social account, if a proper interest was excited in it, which should not take the form of a scandal, but rather of a mystery, in some way connected with a tender attachment between Altiora and her cousin Sark; and that, in fact, if dexterously managed, it might be the means of acquiring for the Baron and Baroness a not unenviable fashionable notoriety. With a lovely and beautiful heiress for a daughter, with an earl for her cousin—who was consoling himself by a visit to his uncle the duke, during the romantic and mysterious disappearance under the most uncompromising circumstances of the cousin of his love—the Italian adventurer and his wife were supplied with aristocratic materials enough, if they were only cleverly employed, to compensate for any temporary inconvenience to which they had been subjected by Altiora's conduct; and they rather began to enjoy the complication to which it had given rise than otherwise.

Mr Murkle and Mrs Clymer, however, took a very different view of matters, and put their heads together, and plotted vengeance, and con-

cocted schemes of discovery, from which the Baron and Baroness were excluded, in which interesting occupation they were suddenly provided with a valuable and most unexpected ally. This was none other than Ronald MacAlpine, who, finding his occupation gone when the whole party had vanished so mysteriously from Paris, followed them to London, and now heard the whole of the singular history from the lips of Mr Murkle and Mrs Clymer, upon which lady he had made it a point to call immediately on his arrival in town.

“I came across in the same train with Hetherington,” he said, “but I failed to extract any of the facts as you give them. All he seemed to know or was willing to tell was, that all our party except ourselves had left Paris. I thought it—er—most extremely singular of none of you to say a word of your intentions beforehand. I have no doubt Hetherington knows where Miss Peto is, and has gone straight to her. You have perceived, doubtless, how deeply his affections are engaged in that quarter.”

“All we know at present is,” said Mrs Clymer, “that Sark is at Beaucourt, and that he knows where the fugitives are hiding. The Grandesellas

are evidently satisfied to let matters take their own course at present ; but both Mr Murkle and I have reasons for wishing to bring this absurd escapade to an end."

"The best plan will be," said Ronald, "for me to propose to go myself to Beaucourt. The Duchess invited me just before I went to Paris, and I asked her to allow me to postpone my visit. I shall easily be able to find out something from Sark,—at any rate I can keep you informed of his movements."

"I think," said Murkle, "that I am justified in telling you under the circumstances, what of course you will consider absolutely confidential so far as the general public is concerned, that I am engaged to be married to Miss Walton. Mrs Clymer, to whom I communicated this fact, agrees with me in thinking that Lord Sark ought at once to be warned against indulging in hopes which can only end in disappointment. Should you go to Beaucourt, you may have an opportunity of saying something on the subject, but it must be left to your own discretion to make a judicious use of this information."

Murkle and Mrs Clymer had indeed already decided that, although the facts did not alto-

gether warrant this assertion, it was one which, for the purpose of influencing Sark, it was quite lawful to make ; and the former was not sorry to impart it as a piece of intelligence to MacAlpine, whose own attentions to the heiress had of late been inconveniently assiduous.

“ I am sure,” said Mrs Clymer, by way of furnishing Ronald with another hint for his guidance, “ if Sark only knew how devotedly attached his cousin Altiora was to him, he would not wound her feelings by flirting ostentatiously with that vulgar Californian.”

“ You quite surprise me,” said Ronald, who thus saw his hopes vanishing in every direction. “ Murkle engaged to be married to Miss Walton ! Pray accept—er—my congratulations,” and he bowed with a forced smile to that gentleman : “ and Miss Peto attached to Lord Sark. Pray, Mrs Clymer, what authority have you for this statement ? ”

“ The authority of my own observation, which is the best, and the admission of the girl’s own mother.”

“ And,” added Murkle, “ her own acknowledgment of the fact to me as one of her oldest friends ; but this is, of course, again in confidence.”

“I think,” remarked Mrs Clymer, after MacAlpine had taken his departure, “that if he uses this information with which we have supplied him, with tact and discretion, and if we supplement it with a little private correspondence of our own to the parties chiefly interested, we ought to complicate matters sufficiently to prevent any serious mischief arising out of the present situation, which is too strained to last very long.”

Three days after, she received the following letter from MacAlpine, dated Beaucourt :—

“DEAR MRS CLYMER,—Whom should I meet on the platform of the station for Beaucourt, but Miss Terrill, Miss Walton, and Alderney, who had accompanied them from their undiscovered seclusion, while Sark was waiting to receive them. They were somewhat disconcerted on my making my appearance, and Lord Sark muttered something about an unexpected pleasure, as he had not observed my name in his aunt’s list of guests.

“Miss Peto, with the elderly person named Hannah, is, it appears, hiding in some remote village, the name of which I have not yet been

able to discover ; but I have lost no time in letting you know this much, as you will at once perceive what a favourable opportunity is afforded me for making use of the information with which you and Murkle were so good as to furnish me.—
Yours sincerely, RONALD MACALPINE.”

Two days later the Beaucourt post-bag contained the following letter from Mattie Terrill to her friends at Copleydale :—

“MY DARLING OLD HANNAH,—Stella wrote a line to Altiora to tell you of our safe arrival, and how we met Mr MacAlpine and Lord Sark at the station, and how we were received at Beaucourt by four men with whitewashed heads, red plush breeches and waistcoats, and silk stockings and buff-coloured coats, with cords dangling over their shoulders—and how a gentlemanlike personage in evening dress, who was called the groom of the chambers, and we thought at first was one of the family, and therefore a relative perhaps of Altiora, showed us to our bedrooms ; but she had not time to tell you more to save the mail, so I will go on. We had not seen anybody then, because it was past seven, and

they were all dressing for dinner. Well, we fixed ourselves fit to kill, you bet. We had not been six weeks in Paris for nothing; and Stella insisted upon not keeping all my jewels to herself, but making me wear some. I don't think I ever did see anything handsomer than Stella looked in that mother-of-pearl embroidery and pink ostrich-feather dress, with the long brocade train that we got at Worth's.

“Well, just as we were ready, and were wondering what to do next, we heard a knock at the door, and in came a handsome old lady with a magnificent tiara of diamonds, and a most benevolent eye and sweet smile and winning manner, and shook us both warmly by the hand, and told us she was the Duchess, and would show us the way to the drawing-room; and on the stairs, quite accidentally of course, we met Bob, and at the drawing-room door, also quite accidentally, Lord Sark, so we made our *entrée* well protected. The Duchess said she thought, as we were alone, we might feel a little timid among so many strangers. I guess if she had seen a little more of life she would not have made that mistake. We found the room full of people. Some of the ladies looked at us as if we

were wild beasts: I think they expected us to draw revolvers and shoot freely. Others took no notice of us; but the men took a warm and sympathetic interest in us, which only made the women madder. Some of these Englishmen are perfectly splendid, and I had just been introduced to one of them when dinner was announced, and Bob came and offered me his arm. Luckily he has not got much rank, so he fell quite naturally to me; but Lord Sark had to take in the old Countess of Broadmere—she is what they call a dowager, because her husband is dead. We should call her a widow. I counted twenty-six at dinner, and Bob told me all their names and something about each. There was the Marquis and Marchioness of Swansdowne and their two daughters, Lady Florence and Lady Blanche Featherpoll: I'll tell you about them later. And Lord and Lady Grandchamp, the Duke's eldest son and his wife. And old Lord Cracklehurst, with deep lines all over his face, and an eye-glass and a hooked nose. He kept staring at Stella all dinner-time; and Bob said he was very popular with young women, and respected by young men still, because he was celebrated as having been the wickedest young man of his day.

And old Lady Broadmere, who, Bob declared, was wicked still; in fact I had no idea Bob had such a bitter tongue. And the Hon. Mrs Haseleyne, who was separated from her husband; but the fault, Bob said, was all on his side, 'of course.' And the Russian Princess Chemiseoff, who chattered broken English with the most charming vivacity, and was ever so bright, and seemed quite young. Bob said her husband was in Bokhara, a governor-general or something; and nobody knew exactly why she came and lived so much in England, but that made people all the more civil to her. And there was Mr and Madame Lauriola. Bob said he was a great man in the City, and she was the last new professional beauty; he was a naturalised foreigner, but nobody knew anything definite as to his origin, but she insisted upon being called Madame, because it gave her a sort of prestige. They had only risen above the social horizon two seasons before, but now they went everywhere, because Sir George Dashington, the Duke's nephew and Sark's brother-in-law, had taken her up, and got the Duchess, who was too good-natured, and his wife, who was too 'timid,' to refuse, to take her about; and Lauriola had put Sir George

into no end of good City things, and he had made pots of money. And the Lauriolas had given the best entertainments of the year last season, and everybody had gone to them. And she had become quite the rage, because she said such impertinent things to the women, and allowed the men to say such impertinent things to her without taking offence. There was nothing you couldn't say to her, said Bob, if you only knew how to put it. Her conversation was more *risqué* than that of any woman in London; and with that, and a pretty face and lots of money, she was sure to get on. Altiora will tell you what *risqué* means. I had to ask Bob. And then there was Miss Gazewell, Lady Broadmere's niece, who tries to get a husband by imitating Madame Lauriola; but Bob says she won't succeed, because men don't like that sort of thing so much in their own wives as in those of their friends. Then there was Lord St Olave, who, Bob says, is rather nice, and a great friend of Sark's, and is in love with Lady Adela Dashington, Sark's sister, because her husband, Sir George, insists that she is too proper, and does not make herself sufficiently admired by the men; so she allows St Olave to worship, because

he is a safe man, with a certain sense of honour. It seems she does not go in for flirtations, except to please Sir George, who feels more at liberty then. And there was the Hon. Frank Basinghall, who is Mrs Haseleyne's 'man.' Bob said that was what he was always called about town, and that was all he knew about him. He did not go in much for those kind of men himself. Besides these, there was Colonel Lysper of the Guards, who flirted with Madame Lauriola, in order to curry favour with the City magnate, and be put into good things; and Mr MacAlpine; and last of all, the old Duke himself, who flirted in the most paternal way with all indiscriminately, and seems as much the essence of good-nature as his wife does. There now, Hannah, you won't be able to understand most of this, because it is such a high state of civilisation; and if Altiora can't explain it, you must ask Mr Hetherington, and if he can't, or won't, you had better not know it—it might hurt your dear old morals. Luckily for Stella and me, ours are cast-iron; but we tremble when we think what the consequences might have been had we brought you with us. We stayed a little longer than, I believe, is usual after dinner, because the

Princess Chemiseoff and Madame Lauriola both like to smoke their cigarettes over their coffee with the men—and I expected to see Stella prove her efficiency in the newly acquired art; but when she was offered one, she declined, saying that she only smoked strong perique in Manzanita-wood pipes. There happened to be a pause when she said it in the most quiet commonplace tones imaginable. The ladies all looked at her with silent horror, though, if it was true, I don't see why perique is so much more dreadful than Turkish tobacco, or Manzanita wood than cigarette paper. In fact nobody knew what either one or the other was, so she had to invent a description of perique, which she does not know anything about either, and Mr Lauriola undertook to correct her, because he said he had been a good deal in early life in New Orleans. So she asked him, quite innocently, if he was any relation to the Lauriola who keeps a tobacconist's store in Carondelet Street. If a shell had burst in the middle of the table, it could not have produced a greater effect than this very natural remark; but Stella told me afterwards she did it on purpose, to pay Madame Lauriola off for some impertinent remarks she overheard her

make to Colonel Lysper about us in quite a loud tone. She said as she was using her faculty of invention about perique, she thought she might as well invent Lauriola the tobacconist. I am sure neither of them will ever forgive her, but I could see some of the gentlemen highly appreciated the joke. Indeed old Lord Cracklehurst gave a sort of approving Haw, haw!—which sounded like Hear, hear! which, Bob says, is all he has ever said in the House of Lords,—and they all began to talk very loud, apparently in the hope of forgetting as soon as possible that, for all they knew, they might actually be sitting at the same table with a man whose brother was a tobacconist; and in the middle of the noise the ladies escaped, and Lady Broadmere came running up to Stella, as soon as we got to the drawing-room, and said, ‘Tell me, dear, is it true that Mr Lauriola’s brother is a tobacconist?’ And Mrs Haseleyne came up to me and said, ‘What a clever, satirical, beautiful creature your friend is! I assure you, I am quite afraid of her. She kept Sir George Dashington, who sat between us, in fits of laughter all dinner-time, and made herself so agreeable, I could not get a word in. Are you both coming to London this

season? She'll make quite a *furor*—and with her fortune, too!

“Lady Swansdowne and her daughters, Madame Lauriola and Miss Gazewell, formed a sort of coterie apart, and treated us with silent contempt; and the Russian princess gazed at us with a sort of amiable amazement, first whispering to the Duchess, and then staring at us through her gold eye-glasses, so that we should have no doubt who she was talking about, and apparently wishing us to understand that she was interested in us as new specimens. But the only really nice woman was the Duke's niece, Lady Adela Dashington, who came and talked to me, while Stella, after answering Lady Broadmere's questions, was posting herself upon social subjects from that experienced dowager, so, as she told me afterwards, she might know the ropes generally. When the men came in there was a general shuffle, and a little game of some sort going on all round. I could see that Madame Lauriola was quite mad with her 'man,' Sir George Dashington, because Stella had fascinated him at dinner, and he wanted to get back to her now, but Madame would not let him; and Mrs Haseleyne's man was angry, because Colonel Lysper had monop-

lised the only vacant chair near her, and prowled about like a discontented wild cat ; and old Cracklehurst began a sort of fossil flirtation in a loud tone with Lady Broadmere ; and Sark and Mac-Alpine both made a dead point at Stella, and finally sat down, one on each side of her ; and Miss Gazewell was furious because no one would flirt with her ; and Lady Swansdowne was furious because Lord Grandchamp was keeping the young men away from her pretty daughter, Lady Florence ; and she and Lady Grandchamp consoled each other and gazed at him ; and Lord St Olave went into a corner with Lady Adela Dashington ; and Lauriola fastened himself on to the Duke, because he was a duke, and talked politics ; and Bob came to me ; and the Russian princess seemed to have a great deal to say to the Duchess, and kept watchful eyes upon everybody through her eye-glasses. Then there was another general shuffle, when we had some rather bad music ; and Stella and I at last were asked if we played or sang. You know what a voice she has, and you know that I was considered Hartman's best pupil at San Francisco. So when she sang and I played, she exploded shell number two. Madame Lauriola tried to go on talking, but her

voice died away in the stillness of the general hush of admiration; and the dear girl surpassed herself in those chest-notes of hers, so that there was a burst of applause when she had finished that carried dismay into many feminine bosoms. And I overheard Lord Grandchamp say to Sark, 'Why, my dear Sark, the Clymer is not a patch upon her,' or some such thing, which I suppose is an Anglicism.

"We went off to bed, consequently, in a blaze of triumph, and found that breakfast next morning was a sort of movable meal, which began about ten, and went on for an hour and a half—people coming down when they liked, and sitting about at separate tables like a restaurant. The dandily dressed men of the night before all seemed to me suddenly transformed into teamsters; they wore enormous hob-nailed boots, and gaiters or long stockings, and breeches or knickerbockers, and coarse, rough shooting jackets and vests, and ate large breakfasts, everybody going to the side-tables and helping themselves. I don't know where all the servants with the whitewashed heads were, but they left us to ourselves—even the Duke went and cut his own ham; and then they all started off to shoot, and left us to our-



"I overheard Lord Grandchamp say to Sark, 'Why, my dear Sark, the Clymer is not a patch upon her.'"—VOL. I., PAGE 240.

selves. Even Bob said he couldn't get off going. I felt quite ashamed of his legs when I compared them with some of the others, and he seemed quite out of his element; but he said the alternative was to face thirteen women and Mac-Alpine, whom he put in as one extra, and that was more than he could stand, even though I was one of them. So we were left to stew in our own juice, and I thought I could not employ my time better than in writing you these first impressions of the British aristocracy, while they are, no doubt, exchanging their first impressions about me.— Lovingly,

MATTIE."

CHAPTER XV.

THE EARL OF SARK AT BAY.

IF Mattie could have gone into the smoking-room with the gentlemen instead of going to bed with her friend on the night before she wrote her letter, she might have overheard a conversation between Sark and MacAlpine in a quiet corner of that midnight resort, which would have seriously increased its bulk.

“I am so glad to have a quiet moment with you,” said MacAlpine, “to ask if you can give me any information about that most mysterious—er—I think our American friends would call it—stampede, which you made with them and Miss Peto from Paris.”

“I did not make any stampede with them,” returned Sark, shortly; “I came over from Paris to London by myself.”

“Oh—er—then perhaps you can tell me why

they went off so extremely suddenly by themselves, and where Miss Peto is now?"

"I am not aware that, even supposing I know, I owe you any confidence on the subject," Sark answered still more brusquely.

"I assure you I am the last person to interfere in matters which don't concern me, or to allow any mere curiosity to influence me; but this is a subject in which I have some sort of indirect interest. I don't mind telling you now that not long since I proposed to Miss Peto, and had some reason to believe that any mere prejudice she might entertain in regard to certain—er—philosophical opinions which I hold, might be overcome, when I found a most unexpected—er—obstacle in Paris, and this I have good reason for saying is none other than yourself."

"Myself!" ejaculated Lord Sark, amazed.

"So Murkle has assured me on a confidential occasion, the details of which it is not necessary to mention, Miss Peto seems to have given him to understand that she had placed her affections irrevocably upon your lordship. You know Murkle has known her from her childhood."

"Impossible!" said Sark. "I have equally good reason for knowing the contrary."

“You will pardon me for saying that you have been misled. I can quite imagine that Miss Peto carefully concealed from you the nature of her feelings; indeed she has good reason for doing so, and I don’t see how, considering your undisguised admiration for Miss Walton, and your no less notorious—er—pardon me—intimacy with Mrs Clymer, she could do otherwise; but you may depend upon it, the facts are as she stated them to Murkle. It may render you less sceptical, if I add that he was at the time informing her of his engagement to Miss Walton.”

“You mean render me more sceptical!” exclaimed Sark, still more overcome with astonishment. “Do you mean to tell me that Miss Walton has engaged herself to Murkle?”

“I think you will find that to be the case; but I don’t think, from what he said, that she wishes it known until she has enjoyed a little more unmarried freedom in England. These sort of—er—provisional arrangements are an American custom, you know.”

“I don’t know anything about American customs,” said Sark, who now began to feel as thoroughly uncomfortable at the idea of Altiora,

on his account, having become the victim of an unrequited attachment, as of the heiress being engaged to Murkle.

“ Well, now that you know the facts of the case, I hope you consider that I was justified in making the inquiries I did about Miss Peto. I was actuated merely by—er—a sentiment of interest towards her ; and I know no man who can extract her from the—er—false position in which she has placed herself so well as yourself.”

Sark threw away the stump of his cigar with an indignant jerk, took up his bedroom candle, and with an abrupt “ good-night,” turned on his heel, without vouchsafing any reply to this piece of advice. The result of his deliberations was a conversation with Stella, when the ladies came out in a train of carriages to lunch with the gentlemen at a shooting cottage, and inspect the result of the morning’s sport. It was no easy work to disentangle that young lady from a group of admirers ; but he was ably seconded by Ronald, who had silently watched the effect of the dose he had administered on the previous evening, and drew her off to where some boulders of rock afforded a seat and a shelter.

Stella’s manner to Lord Sark had changed a

good deal since he had proved his devotion by following her from Paris, and getting her invited to Beaucourt, but was still cold and distant. She seemed to him now especially unapproachable and on her guard.

“Miss Walton,” he said, “I have forborne from troubling you with an admiration which seems to annoy you, as my only desire, while you are staying here, is that you should thoroughly enjoy yourself; but I have heard something in regard to which, as it affects the happiness of another in whom we are both interested, I cannot keep silence. You know my cousin Altiora so well, that I am sure you will answer my question, though I feel it is an extremely embarrassing one to put.”

“Gladly and truly, if I can,” said Stella, much relieved to find that it had no reference to herself.

“Did my cousin, Altiora, ever give you reason to suppose that she cared for me?”

Now Stella, as we have seen, had convinced herself, by many signs known to sensitive young ladies, too generous to be jealous, but not the less alive to a certain kind of suspicion where their affections are concerned, that Altiora was in love with her cousin, and had only concealed

it because she had perceived that Sark had only slipped from the thralldom of the Clymer, whom she despised, to succumb to the fascinations of her friend; and she partly attributed the desire Altiora had shown,—first, to break the tie which existed between her cousin and Mrs Clymer; and secondly, to escape herself from the influence of that woman,—to this cause. If she had any further doubt upon the subject, it was removed by the positive assurances of Murkle, which he had not failed to communicate to her after the conversation in which he imagined that she had admitted it; and these had been supplemented by many slight innuendoes on the part of the Baroness. She therefore hesitated and flushed when Sark put his question so abruptly, in a manner which left no doubt in his mind that his worst suspicions were confirmed, and which almost rendered unnecessary her reply.

“She has never mentioned the subject to me,” she said; “but I confess that her studious avoidance of it, and what I have observed and heard from her mother, has led me to believe that such was the case.”

“And now, may I ask you another question, Miss Walton?”

“I am not so sure about this one,” she replied with instinctive apprehension. “You must be careful.”

“But it is closely connected with the last—indeed its answer will determine my course of conduct with regard to Altiora.”

“Go on then,” she replied shortly.

“Are you engaged to be married to Mr Murkle?”

It was a supreme moment for the penniless Californian girl. She had only to tell the truth, and say No, to secure a countess's coronet; for she knew that Sark only asked the question to clear the way for that other on which her own future happiness depended, and she felt that if she admitted she had listened to Murkle, she would lose his good opinion, and that he would be drawn to Altiora by her love for him. But what made it hardest was, not that she would have to give up the coronet, for which, to do her justice, she cared very little—but the man, for whom she had learnt to care a great deal; and he looked so handsome and so pleading at that moment, lying at her feet as she sat on the rock, that her heart seemed to go out to him, and to quiver with the effort of making her decision, without

allowing the momentary doubt and hesitation to become apparent in her features. Her lips, nevertheless, trembled slightly as she replied—

“Mr Murkle and I have some business matters to arrange, and one of them has reference to a matrimonial contract, in regard to the details of which I am not at liberty to enter. I must ask you to be satisfied with this answer, and not to press me further.”

“A provisional contract, such as I understand is made sometimes across the Atlantic?” said Sark, bitterly,—for the notion of her having consented to stand in any such relation to Murkle was more than he could bear.

“A provisional contract,” she repeated coldly, as she rose and walked off to join a group in the distance, leaving Sark chewing the cud of his disappointment, and his toothpick.

A letter which Mrs Clymer received the day following this episode from MacAlpine, contained a very accurate report of his conversation with Sark, and of the conclusions at which he had arrived in regard to the effect that it had produced; and he further alluded incidentally to the success which had been achieved by the American girls, and the jealousy which had been

excited by them in the breast especially of Madame Lauriola. Now it so happened that this passage Mrs Clymer read to the Baroness Grandesella, and that the Grandesellas and Lauriolas had been on tolerably intimate terms before the latter had attained the summit of that social ambition towards which the former were still laboriously toiling; for they had been in many contracts together, had jointly promoted companies, and had been copartners of concessions. In fact, at this moment Lauriola was not altogether uninterested in the amalgamation of the Universal Scintillator with the Dark Continent Illumination Company, which was taking place under the auspices of Grandesella and Murkle, ostensibly for the pecuniary benefit of Sark. When, therefore, the respectable firm who controlled the destinies of Altiora, discovered that the Lauriolas were at Beaucourt, after smothering the first pangs of envy, they determined to turn this fortunate circumstance to account according to their several instincts. Madame Grandesella decided to write to her dear Madame Lauriola, giving her a detailed history of the flight of Altiora with the young ladies who were now guests at Beaucourt, and

of the concealment of her daughter under their auspices, and of the part Mrs Clymer had played in the whole transaction, which, as Madame Lauriola and the Clymer were bitter enemies and social rivals, was a weapon in the hand of the former that she would not be slow to avail herself of. And Grandesella wrote to Lauriola, telling him he had good reason to think that Sark was likely to try and back out of the Electric Scintillating Companies' amalgamation arrangement, and to extricate himself from his pecuniary difficulties by marrying the Californian heiress, which should, at all hazards, be prevented. The consequence was, that the whole fashionable world was soon ringing with varied versions of the extraordinary event in high life, the interest of which centred at Beaucourt, and which propelled the Grandesellas into that fashionable notoriety they courted, at a single bound. Mrs Haseleyne, who was one of the fashionable contributors to a social weekly of those paragraphs that form the *chronique scandaleuse* of the aristocracy and that delight the middle class, wrote as follows :—

“The Duke and Duchess of Beaucourt are entertaining a distinguished party at Beaucourt

Castle, including ‘the Marquis and Marchioness of Swansdowne, and the Ladies Featherpoll, the Countess of Broadmere, and Miss Gazewell, the Earl of Cracklehurst, the Earl of Sark, Lord St Olave, the Princess Chemiseoff,’” and so on with the whole list, ending with Colonel Lysper; and then, in another paragraph:—

“Great interest is attached to the celebrated Californian heiress and her friend, who are staying at the Castle, not merely on account of the extreme beauty and fabulous wealth of the former, which will render her one of the most prominent *débutantes* of the next London season, but in consequence of the share she has taken in an event which cannot fail to signalise her advent into the world of fashion. A week has scarcely elapsed since the lovely, accomplished Miss Peto, a cousin of the Earl of Sark and step-daughter of the eminent financier, Baron de Grandesella, fled from her home in Paris with Miss Walton and Miss Terrill, escorted, it is said, by Mr Robert Alderney and an American *duenna*, with whom she is still in some place of concealment. It is understood that, as Miss Walton and Miss Terrill and Mr Alderney refuse to give any information in regard to the whereabouts of Miss Peto, Baron

Grandesella, who is her legal guardian, contemplates taking legal proceedings against them."

Then another:—

"It is whispered that the sudden disappearance of Lord Sark's beautiful cousin is not altogether unconnected with another luminary of fashion, who burst upon us not long since from the other side of the Atlantic, and whom to allude to as the greatest social success of her first season is to name."

Then another:—

"If our American visitors are going to bring social storms with them, I really recommend the 'New York Herald' to supplement its weather predictions with a social storm-register, thus: 'A dangerous female combination has just left the shores of the Eastern States. May be expected off the west coast of Ireland about the 22d or 23d.'"

Then another:—

"I should advise investors to beware of amalgamation schemes of Electric Light with Universal Scintillating Companies. I know nothing of Grandesella personally, but I do know Lauriola, and I am not totally unacquainted with the antecedents of Murkle. Perhaps the directors of the

Company, of which that very estimable nobleman, Lord Sark, is chairman, may also, by this time, know something of these gentlemen."

When these dexterously connected paragraphs were read by Baron Grandesella and his wife, they threw them into a transport of delight until they came to the last, when they suffered a temporary depression of spirits. Still all publicity, even when it was not complimentary, suited the Baron better than the silence of obscurity. And after all, was he not called an eminent financier, and his step-daughter alluded to as the cousin of an earl? When Murkle read them, he ground his teeth, and cursed the financial spy system of a libellous press. When Mrs Clymer read them, she smiled, conscious that the mysterious allusion to her would only have the effect of enhancing the interest she always excited. When Mrs Haseleyne read them, she was the first to point them out to the Duchess, with the remark, "Isn't it too bad, dear Duchess, that these family episodes should get out, and be given in such a garbled form to an inquisitive public? I often do wonder how the editors of these social weeklies get their information." For Mrs Haseleyne lived in mortal dread of being discovered as the fashion-

able contributor to the one in question, and had managed to post her letter to the editor herself, rather than trust it to the Beaucourt post-bag, and the editor had added the last paragraph to those she had sent him. And when Lord Sark read them, he took them with bitterness in his soul to Stella, upon whom, with lover-like inconsistency, he now heaped the responsibility of all the discomfort of the situation generally. But Stella perused them, to his great annoyance, with much equanimity and apparent interest.

“Why, this is becoming positively exciting!” she remarked. “Fancy beginning my experiences in England by a lawsuit to retain possession of a persecuted young lady! I declare it’s perfectly splendid; I must go and consult Bob and Mattie.”

The fact was, that she and Bob and Mattie had all three become pretty well hardened by this time,—to such a storm of curious inquiry had they been subjected from the moment that Madame Lauriola had imparted the contents of Baroness Grandesella’s letter to a select feminine group, of which, as we have seen, Mrs Haseleyne proved a not inattentive listener.

“Who are these Grandesellas, my dear?” asked

Lady Broadmere of Madame Lauriola. "I never heard of them."

"Upstarts, who are trying to push their way into society," replied that lady. "I only know Madame Grandesella slightly. My husband, I believe, has had some business matters to arrange with him."

"But I don't quite understand," said Lady Swansdowne, "what Mrs Clymer had to do with it. Why on earth did the girl run away from Mrs Clymer? I should have thought her a most advantageous acquaintance for a girl in her position."

"Oh, as for her running away from Mrs Clymer," responded Madame Lauriola spitefully, "I don't wonder at that; but they evidently quarrelled over Sark, at whose head probably the Baroness wanted to fling her daughter. To get at the rights of the story you would have to ask Sark." And Mrs Haseleyne made a mental memorandum that she would see how much she could extract from his unsuspecting lordship, in her quality of secret reporter for the press.

"Zat is one of ze most strange *histoires* I ever did hear," remarked the Princess Chemiseoff. "Ze girl is hiding from her parents, and zere are

tree or four persons in zis house who knows vere she is, and you cannot find her. What is ze police about?"

"Oh, it is not a matter for the police," said Lady Adela Dashington. "Poor Sark, how annoyed he will be at having his name dragged into it all! I wonder who will break it to the Duchess." But, as we have seen, the Duchess had been prepared for it all, in the first instance, by Sark himself, though she never expected it to become a matter of public notoriety. And with her usual thoughtful kindness, she no sooner heard of the letter Madame Lauriola had received, than she went off to prepare her American guests for the severe fire of cross-examination they were likely to encounter; but the coolness they displayed under that fire, and the skill they exhibited in baffling their adversaries, did credit to their Cedar Buttes education.

"I have had no intimation from the Baron and Baroness Grandesella," said Stella, "that their daughter is staying with my friend in the country against her will; they have never communicated with me on the subject. Of course I don't know anything about your English ways, and supposed a girl did not always require to ask leave of her

parents before going to pay a visit to her friends. Indeed I wrote myself to the Baroness, to tell she was coming with us, and I supposed that was enough; but you English are so absurdly particular."

"Particular! *Mon Dieu*," said the Princess, "zey are not half so particular as ze Russians!" and she looked across the lawn at Miss Gazewell going out for a *tête-à-tête* ride with Colonel Lysper.

"Do tell us what Mrs Clymer had to do with it?" asked Lady Florence Featherpoll. "She is one of my dearest friends. I think her quite too deliciously enchanting. I am just writing to ask her all about it."

"Then wait for her answer, my dear," said Stella, who had learned to imitate Lady Broadmere's patronising "my dear," with a nicety that made Lady Florence flush with indignation, and everybody else titter. Bob rose so much in Mattie's estimation by a trick he had, when asked compromising questions, of sticking his glass in his eye, and staring blankly through it at his questioner, as if he was gradually sinking into a state of mental imbecility, and then asking him silly questions, that, in a moment of enthusiasm,

after he had particularly distinguished himself, she murmured affectionately, "Why, you splendid Bob, I take back all I said about making you go on to the Stock Exchange. You are too clever for it. Just you hang on to the Zend-Avesta."

There were two men, however, one of whom was made thoroughly happy, and the other equally miserable, by the whole episode. The first was MacAlpine, and the other was Sark. The former just knew enough to be able to give little dissertations to all inquirers, and air his elegant diction and authoritative utterance with the bland consciousness of superior information, which, moreover, enabled him to assume an air of mystery, as though there was much that he knew that he did not tell; whereas, in point of fact, he told a good deal more than he knew. Sark, on the other hand, was utterly unapproachable, even by the boldest, on the subject. There was that about him which, when he was roused from the apathy that had enabled the Clymer to rivet her chains upon him, made men and women careful how they ventured too rashly on a familiarity which he did not invite. So he had no difficulty in avoiding cross-examination; but his position in the affair was all the more canvassed,

especially when the paragraphs in the social weekly appeared, and his connection with a questionable financial arrangement was appended to the domestic scandal.

“I see,” said Lauriola to Sark, as they sat together watching Lysper and Basinghall playing billiards, “that infernal scoundrel, who makes it his business to attack me in all my business operations, has taken the liberty of connecting your lordship’s name with mine, with reference to that amalgamation scheme in which we are both interested. I have a letter from Murkle on the subject of that last transfer which your lordship has undertaken to complete.”

“I think we had better not drag business affairs into our life here,” replied Sark. “As for the paragraph, I deliberately rushed upon my fate when I went into the City, and I don’t complain. I should say you had made enough, Lauriola, not to mind a little dirt being thrown at you. A dab or two more or less won’t make much difference.” And his lordship turned on his heel, leaving the financier to pour out his feelings to MacAlpine, who came and took the vacant seat.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LITTLE FASHIONABLE CONVERSATION.

ALBERT LAURIOLA was morally and physically a coarse-fibred, stumpy little man, with a very slight foreign accent, whose vulgarity would have fatally handicapped any other woman than his lovely and talented wife in the social scratch race. He was therefore all the more proud of the success which he had achieved, and his inordinate vanity led him constantly to expatiate upon it.

“This affair may turn out a lucky *coup* socially for Grandesella,” he said, turning to MacAlpine after Sark had left. “It just gives him the kind of notoriety he wants. It has been a curious race all through life between us. I bet him an even hundred I’d get made a Baron before he did, and he won. Then I bet Murkle I

would get into Parliament before he did, and I lost again. Then Grandesella bet me that he would win the blue ribbon of society before I did, and I won; but I knew with my wife I was safe. Bless you, she's a woman in a thousand! nothing could stand against her. Now that step-daughter of Grandesella's ought to carry him anywhere. His wife is against him—she's downright vulgar, you know; but they tell me the girl is as handsome as a Peri—one of your regular blue-blooded ones; and so she ought to be seeing she's Sark's cousin. It's a great chance for Grandesella, to be sure."

"Tell us how you went to work to make your own running, old man," said Basinghall, who had finished his game and overheard Lauriola's last few remarks, and who perceived that he was under the influence of sundry sodas-and-brandies, and therefore in a communicative mood, and not likely easily to take offence. Basinghall, as "Mrs Haseleyne's man," used to make himself useful in picking up interesting scraps of information—likely in this case to be especially welcome, as she had a grudge against Madame Lauriola. "To tell you the truth, I never could understand how you and your wife man-

aged to achieve your brilliant social success so rapidly.”

Lauriola, who was as vain as he was vulgar, flattered by the marked attention which his three listeners—for Lysper had joined the other two—seemed inclined to accord to a recital of his great social achievements, was probably more expansive than he would have been under other circumstances—certainly much more so than if Madame had been present.

“Why, you see, my little woman is ambitious, and clever as she is—though I say it that shouldn’t—beautiful.

“‘Albert,’ she said to me one day, ‘how is it you never bring any peers or noblemen to see me?’

“That was just after I had completed my contracts for the Submarine Telephonic Company, which brought me in pretty near half a million.

“‘I was looking through the names of the directors of some of the boards you are on,’ she said. ‘There’s the Earl of Creedmore, and Lord Pytchley, and Sir George Dashington.’

“‘I only know them officially,’ I said. ‘I couldn’t venture to ask them to come; and they wouldn’t come if I did.’

“‘Come out and drive with me in the Park to-morrow, and we’ll look for some of them,’ says she.

“The first man we saw riding next day was Dashington ; and when he nodded to me, he looked pretty hard at her ; and next board-meeting she came to call at the Company’s offices in the brougham, and sent me up a note to say she was waiting. It had been arranged before, that I was accidentally to come down with Dashington ; and when he saw her pretty face looking out, and smiling and nodding to me, ‘Introduce me to your wife,’ he whispers ; so I introduced him, and went back to the board-room to sign some papers I had forgotten, and left him talking to Madame through the carriage-window. And when I came back,—

“‘Just think, Albert,’ she said ; ‘Sir George has promised to dine with us to-night if we are quite alone, and will let him go to the House immediately after dinner.’”

“And did Dashington go to the House immediately after dinner ?” asked Lysper, with an air of assumed innocence.

“I don’t know, for I had to meet a man at the club early in the evening, and left him with my

wife ; but that little dinner was the beginning of our good fortune. Dashington would dine with us two or three times a-week ; and their was nothing he would not do for Madame, he took such a fancy to her—so much deep sympathy between them, and all that sort of thing, you know. But I was not going to have scandals set on foot, when I knew there was no ground for them, so I insisted he must bring Lady Adela to call ; and in order to make it still more proper, Lady Adela and Madame were always driving out together. Then we began to give little dinner-parties, and Dashington asked our Duchess here to invite us to her parties ; and we worked the press and the photographers. First, there were mysterious paragraphs in the social weeklies about the new beauty—we always had some writers at dinner—and I got my life written,—how I look at home, and all that sort of thing.”

“ Yes, I remember,” said Basinghall ; “ that was the first time I ever heard of you. Well, what did you do next ? ”

“ Why, we spared no expense to get professional musicians, and had only a select eight or ten for them to play to : and Dashington gave dinners especially arranged for us—poor aristo-

crats with pretty wives. I put the noblemen into good things, and they brought their pretty wives to dine with us out of gratitude; and the men of fashion who happened to be in love with the pretty wives were only too glad to be asked."

"Yes, I remember," drawled Lysper; "you asked me to meet the Clymer before Sark took her up, and that was the first time I ever heard of you."

"Well, that was how we extended the list of our acquaintances in the highest circles; and what with notices in the papers, and photographs in the shops, and financial plums for the poor aristocrats, and pretty women for the rich ones, we got to where we could give entertainments on a large scale, and ask some social lions."

"And you invited me," interrupted MacAlpine, "and that was the first time I ever heard of you."

"Well, we began to push our way then," pursued Lauriola, not observing the impertinence of these interruptions. "My little woman has got the hide of a rhinoceros and the sting of a wasp; bless you, she never takes offence, but she never forgets. She believes in money, perseverance, good looks, and audacity, as the forces that govern

the world. I used to laugh at her, and call it impudence, but she said you might as well call the *audace* of the first Napoleon impudence. If people didn't return her cards, she would keep on leaving hers till they did, and then say that at last she had made them ashamed of themselves."

"And she was right," said Basinghall; "they should have been ashamed of themselves."

"She had a way of regularly wringing invitations out of people, leaving them astonished at their own helplessness. 'It is better,' she would say, 'to have the whole aristocracy abusing you than that they should be ignorant of your existence.'"

"No, no," said Lysper, encouraged by his obtuseness, "there she was wrong: where ignorance was bliss, 'twas folly to be wise."

"One of her tricks," pursued the unconscious Lauriola, "for frightening an invitation out of a man's wife, by pretending to make love to her husband, I never knew fail. Of course I knew it was only pretence, but neither the poor man nor his wife did. Then, when she had got the invitation, she would throw over the man, and lavish her affections on the wife, who was too glad to purchase her peace of mind so easily.

Still," added Lauriola, musingly, "it is not so hard to get people to invite you to go to their parties as to get them to come to yours; there's where the talent lies. Madame was not one to be satisfied so long as there was a single member of the highest circles, the *élite* of the aristocracy, you know, the very *crème*, that held out. That proud Duchess of Flamborough was the last to give in—but she actually came to dinner."

"What was your secret?" asked Basinghall; "or was it Madame's secret?"

"Just so; that's why I can't tell it to you," replied the *parvenu*, who seemed to feel a glimmer of consciousness that there must be a limit to his indiscretion, and he slowly closed one eye and swallowed the remaining contents of his tumbler with an air of profound cunning. "I must draw the line somewhere, and I draw it at——"

"At your little woman—eh?" said Lysper. "Well, I think it's a pity other people didn't draw it there too; but I warmly congratulate you, my dear fellow, on having such a treasure," he added hurriedly, afraid that he had gone too far, and giving Lauriola a friendly slap on the back by way of a final nocturnal salute.

“What an ineffable little cad it is!” said Basinghall, with a sigh of relief, as he watched Lauriola’s retiring and somewhat unsteady figure. “There must be a hidden charm in Madame to make Dashington tolerate him as he does. Did you hear how Sark snubbed him? By the way, what a mysterious young woman that undiscovered cousin of his seems to be! Why shouldn’t we go into the knight-errant line of business, Lysper,—discover the retreat of this interesting and persecuted female, and go and protect her, or run away with her, as the case may be?”

“If I could only find out where it was, I should be game. We have all of us tried to get it out of Sark, but one might as well try to draw a hedgehog. I must say, MacAlpine, considering that you formed one of the party in Paris, you might have got it out either of the American girls or Bob Alderney before now.”

“I have not made the attempt,” said MacAlpine, primly, “as I have felt bound to respect what I understood to be Miss Peto’s own wishes in the matter; and I doubt whether your services would be particularly—er—acceptable to her in the capacity you suggest.”

“Bob Alderney tells me,” said Basinghall,

“that Grandesella is a large edition of Lauriola, —another of those financiers who want to use their wealth and their womankind as pulleys to hoist them into society; and, as far as I can understand, the daughter has run away because she refuses to be sold to the Clymer for the purpose. I was talking about her to Lady Adela to-day, who had no idea that she had such a cousin in existence till this affair happened, and she tells me she is going to consult Sark about it. By the way, I see you’ve given up Fanny Gazewell, and have been making tremendous running with the Californian heiress for the last day or two.”

“The fair Fanny’s methods of attack are too aggressive,” Lysper simpered. “It is such a bore having to be constantly on your guard. It is all very well with married women, where no harm can come of it, and you can back out when you like, as it seems Sark has from the Clymer; but the way that girl and her aunt lay traps for the unwary, is positively scandalous. Besides, I must marry money if I marry at all.”

“You have got rather a serious rival with the Californian in Sark,” said MacAlpine.

“It seems to me you are not altogether disinterested in that quarter yourself,” retorted the

other; "you seemed to be having a most confidential conversation in the library this morning."

"A little triolet of my own composition that I was reading her; what conceptions of the pure she has for—er—a Californian!"

"Then I'm afraid we have none of us much chance," laughed Basinghall. "However, it's a cup I don't mean to enter for, though there's a style about the girl which, with her money, ought to give her the command of the matrimonial market next season; so if you mean to do anything, Lysper, you have no time to lose. I wonder what made Bob Alderney go in for the friend, who has neither looks nor nuggets. My own impression is that there's a plant somewhere, and that Miss Peto is at the bottom of it."

From all which it appeared that the general situation was one which exercised the imaginations of these smart gentlemen to an unusual degree; nor was it altogether without reason—for in point of fact, both Sark and his sister were at that moment, unconsciously to each other, arranging in their own minds a meeting on the subject, which took place on the following day.

"Adela," said Sark, as he walked her off to the conservatory, "you are one of the best and

purest women I know, and the only one to whom I can unburden myself freely about this new cousin of ours, who, curiously enough, has first revealed her existence to you by hiding away from the world—and not about her alone, but about two other women with whom my fate seems to have become linked in an incomprehensible manner.”

“You need not name them,” said Lady Adela, smiling. “I have not been nearly a week in the house with you and Miss Walton without knowing that she is one, nor have I lived in London for the last two years without knowing that Mrs Clymer is the other.”

“Exactly. You have had abundant opportunity of judging of them both, of estimating the value of their respective powers of fascination, possibly of understanding why, in the one case, the attraction which has held me for so long has lost its charm, and why the other has seemed to me so irresistible. You have observed enough of them both to see how totally unlike they are to the ordinary type, and may have perceived that I yielded, first in the one case and then in the other, to an influence which derived its strength in a large measure from the rarity of

its nature. But you have never seen or known the third, perhaps the most remarkable and uncommon character of the three, and as totally unlike the other two as they are to each other; and yet, strange to say, the one whose influence, even more powerful than that of the other two, has never affected me in the same way."

"You mean," said his sister, "that you did not fall in love with her. Perhaps, considering there were two already, it was an *embarras de richesses*."

"If that was all, the difficulty might be more easily solved," and Sark went on to describe his refusal by Stella, and the reasons he had for believing that his cousin would be sacrificed to gratify the social ambitions of her parents by a forced marriage, or a no less forced intimacy with the woman whom he had himself been the means of introducing to them; and what still more complicated the situation—the hints which he had received, that he had himself won her heart, and therefore had it in his power to save her from the fate which she was now hiding to avoid, at the same time that he secured her happiness for life. In fact, he had, since Stella's rejection of his suit, made up his mind that the easiest

way to escape from the Clymer, to console himself for his disappointment, to secure the happiness of a woman he respected, and to put an end to what threatened to become a domestic scandal of a most disagreeable kind, was to propose to marry her himself—"a fate," he added, "considering her great personal and mental attractions and nobility of character, any man might envy."

"Do you come," asked Lady Adela, "to ask me for my advice, or to tell me your intentions?"

"Like most people who ask advice," he replied, "I come to see whether your advice agrees with my intentions. It is fair to tell you, my mind is pretty well made up on the matter."

"Then, from what you have told me of Miss Peto, I think you have made it up wisely," said Lady Adela, who held Mrs Clymer in such horror that she was delighted at Sark's resolution.

"I am glad," said her brother, "to hear you say so; it does not remove my doubts, for they no longer exist, but it confirms my judgment. It is evident that every day is precious, for I gather that the Grandesellas and Mrs Clymer are on her scent, and her retreat cannot much longer be concealed."

“We go home on Saturday,” said Lady Adela; “and remember, should she need it, she always has a home with us. I am sure George will make no objection.”

“Then I shall start by to-night’s train—called away by sudden business; the only person to whom you may privately tell its nature is Miss Walton. She will be leaving herself the day after to-morrow, but by that time the whole matter will be settled.” And, much to the astonishment of the rest of the party, Sark disappeared the same afternoon, while the ladies were out driving, without saying good-bye to them, having accounted for his absence to the Duchess in a manner which easily satisfied that good-natured woman, but with which she by no means succeeded in so easily satisfying the more suspicious curiosity of her guests.

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY ADELA DASHINGTON.

“CAN you make an effort to get up an hour earlier than usual to-morrow morning, and let us have a walk in the garden?” said Lady Adela, in an undertone, to Stella that evening as they parted for the night. “There are several matters which I think it might be useful for us to discuss together.” Lady Adela had from the first taken a fancy to the heiress, and had learned with pain her brother’s disappointment. She not only wished to discover the girl’s real motive for refusing an offer which, from a worldly point of view, was so eligible, but for accepting the proposal of so undesirable a person as Murkle, on conditions so little creditable to herself. There was a mystery in the whole affair which she was determined to unravel, on Sark’s account; for the episode seemed altogether inconsistent with

the estimate her observation had led her to form of Miss Walton's real character.

To Stella, Lady Adela's conduct had often been no less enigmatical. She had wondered at her intimacy with Lord St Olave, and at a certain lightness and flippancy of manner which was often contradicted by her depth and earnestness of sentiment on the few occasions when the opportunity was afforded of a little longer conversation than usual in a house full of people; and she had no difficulty in divining the motive which had suggested the present meeting. Indeed her curiosity was to some extent roused by her anxiety to discover the cause of Sark's abrupt departure; and by a tacit understanding, they no sooner met than they plunged at once into the topic which was uppermost in both their minds.

"Were you surprised at my brother's sudden disappearance yesterday?" asked Lady Adela.

"Not altogether. He doubtless told you what happened the day before."

"Yes; and that is just why I asked you to meet me alone, for his account of what transpired was so utterly unlike what I expected, and your reasons for refusing him were so different from any I could have conceived possible, that I

thought he must have misunderstood you, and I wanted to hear the rights of the matter from your own lips."

"First tell me, Lady Adela, whether Lord Sark has gone to see his cousin, and with what intention? You will see why it is necessary I should know this before entering upon any explanation, when you have heard what that explanation is."

"Yes," replied Lady Adela; "he has made up his mind, for reasons which you can perhaps understand, to ask Miss Peto to accept him as her husband."

For a moment the colour left Stella's face, and she made a desperate and successful effort to conceal all traces of emotion.

"I am glad of it," she said calmly, after a moment's pause; "they are worthy of each other. Believe me, Lady Adela, you will never regret the choice your brother has made, and he will live to be eternally grateful to me for refusing him. He will marry one who brings him not only the treasures of her heart, but what is more priceless, a moral nature and intellectual gifts of the highest order."

"And now," said Lady Adela, smiling, "the

explanation you promised. You will not think me very curious, but I want to know it, for your own sake. I can understand your refusing Sark, on the ground of not caring for him, but I cannot understand it on the grounds upon which you put it to him."

"You mean what he called my provisional contract with Mr Murkle? My dear Lady Adela, it is so provisional, that there is not the slightest chance of anything ever coming of it. Mr Murkle, knowing I was an heiress, asked me to be his wife as a matter of business; and I, knowing he was a contractor, replied to him as a matter of business. No business contract is an impossibility in the abstract; it simply becomes an impossibility by virtue of the conditions imposed. I placed upon Mr Murkle conditions which I knew to be perfectly impossible for him to comply with; and on those conditions, which it is not necessary for me to specify, I agreed to perform my part of the contract. I also took care to give him a time limit, and in another month it will expire; but nothing would ever induce me to marry him. I only thought, as he evidently wanted to make use of me, that I would make use of him. As an heiress, you know, it

might be often convenient to say that you were engaged, even when you had no intention of marrying the man you pretended to be engaged to. There is nothing so very wrong in that, is there? And," she added, looking at Lady Adela with a humorous twinkle in her eye, "I am so young and inexperienced, you must make allowances for an untutored savage from the wilds of California."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Lady Adela, laughing. "I could wish some of the young savages in my own country were half as well tutored as you. But as you never meant to marry Mr Murkle, I am all the more puzzled to know why you refused Sark. He is a man that women have not found it difficult to love, and he was passionately devoted to you—all the more so, because he became aware of the vast difference which existed in his sentiments for you from that which he felt for the woman from whose bondage you have been the means of releasing him."

"That indeed will be matter of lasting consolation to me," said Stella, with such unexpected earnestness that Lady Adela looked up; and she added hastily, to cover her confusion, "because, you know, I am so fond of Altiora; and I shall ever be glad that I have been the means of

securing her happiness. And *that*, indeed, was my reason for refusing your brother. I thought if I did, and told him how much *Altiora* loved him, his own generous nature would leave him no escape from the honourable alternative of proposing to her,—and, you see, my wily tactics have succeeded. That's what comes of passing one's youth among Red Indians."

"And you did not care for him yourself?" asked Lady Adela, in rather a disappointed tone; for she was proud of her brother, and felt a little piqued at this apparent lack of appreciation on the part of one whom she supposed had not had many opportunities of seeing others like him.

"Oh, I think him most delightful—a man any woman might be proud of," said Stella, warmly. "But I have peculiar ideas as to the sentiments one ought to entertain towards the man one marries," she added, evading the question. "Perhaps some day I will tell you about them. However, all's well that ends well. From what I have seen of English marriages, they don't seem to me very successful."

Lady Adela sighed. "Perhaps if we had what you call your peculiar ideas, they would be happier," she said.

"Dear Lady Adela," Stella went on, "we have

known each other so little, that perhaps my curiosity may seem impertinent, but indeed it is not; and this conversation seems to have brought us so much nearer together, that I feel emboldened by it. You asked me for an explanation, so that you should not do me an injustice; I should like to ask you for one for the same reason—may I?”

“Certainly. If I can I will give it, and I hope it will be as satisfactory as yours.”

“Then,” said Stella, frankly, “I want to know why you allow Lord St Olave to pay you so much attention! Are you not afraid of misconstruction?”

“Misconstruction of conduct which a husband approves, does not hurt a wife socially. If I accept Lord St Olave’s attentions, it is because they protect me from those of others, and because he understands my motives, and is too honourable to take advantage of them. In a society where flirtation forms the principal accomplishment of married life on the part of both partners, it would be ridiculous for a poor weak woman like me to attempt to stem the current, or to set up a standard of my own. In cases where the husbands are especially addicted to this pursuit, their wives are all the less able to stand alone, partly because they lack the legiti-

mate protection; often because they are expected by their own husbands to make their houses attractive to the other sex by accepting their homage; nearly always because men like to see their wives admired, and they themselves gain certain social advantages from their popularity. In addition to this, it allows them greater freedom to flirt themselves if they have wives who flirt; and the wives of men who flirt are much more made up to by the men, because they are less afraid of the husbands, and fancy the wives need consolation. In addition to all these reasons why it is almost necessary for a young married woman to flirt nowadays—the most powerful of all is, that it is the fashion. Therefore, my dear Stella—you don't mind my calling you Stella?—you see that, as we are all doing the same thing, there is no fear of misconstruction, for there is nobody to misconstrue us. If everybody is in the same boat, nobody will tip it over.”

“But,” said Stella, “surely there are exceptions to this general rule of flirtation?”

“Of course there are exceptions, and very numerous exceptions. There are all the people who are happily married, and therefore don't flirt; and there are the husbands who are too busy, and the wives who are too prim, or too

stupid, or too ugly for anybody to want to flirt with them. But they are a scattered company, without cohesion, and don't make society. They are powerless to affect its conduct. Society is a tolerably compact body, with its own standard of propriety, or rather impropriety; and it's no use, whether you are in it or outside of it, to kick against the pricks. If you are good-looking, and your husband exposes you to it for his own purposes, flirt you must. There is scarcely a young man who would not feel he was wanting in the first duty in life, if he saw you were neglected and did not instantly make love to you; and, in fact, the women would be very much surprised if they did not, and very often have to jog their memories and their manners, and commence operations. Now, as I live in the thick of this society, and as I don't want to be eternally either on the aggressive or defensive, St Olave—who has been a good deal tried by some of the beauties, he is so handsome, you know, but really has no taste for flirtation—and I have agreed that we will do just what is required in the mutual adoration line to satisfy society and protect ourselves, and it really succeeds admirably: we have got to be quite fond of each other."

“You don’t tell me!” exclaimed Stella, with such a comical expression of assumed surprise that Lady Adela felt inclined to be offended; seeing which, she hastily added, “There, now, you are angry with me because of my Americanisms; I really must try to break myself of them. How kind of you, Lady Adela, to explain all this to me so clearly! I never should have understood it otherwise. I quite see now, how, in my ignorance of the manners of the best society, I might have misjudged you. What a bad time the girls must have, with all the young married women going on like that! Don’t they do a little flirting too? I have managed a little already; but then, you know, I am a stranger.”

“They do all they know, as my husband would say; but they have not much chance, as Lady Florence and Lady Edith Featherpoll, and Fanny Gazewell will tell you. The men are afraid of getting caught, unless in the case of great heiresses like you; but they are few and far between.”

“Then,” said Stella, demurely, “if my taste happens to run in that direction, I may be able to gratify it.”

“Oh, you’ll be hunted to death! I should advise you to extend the term of your provi-

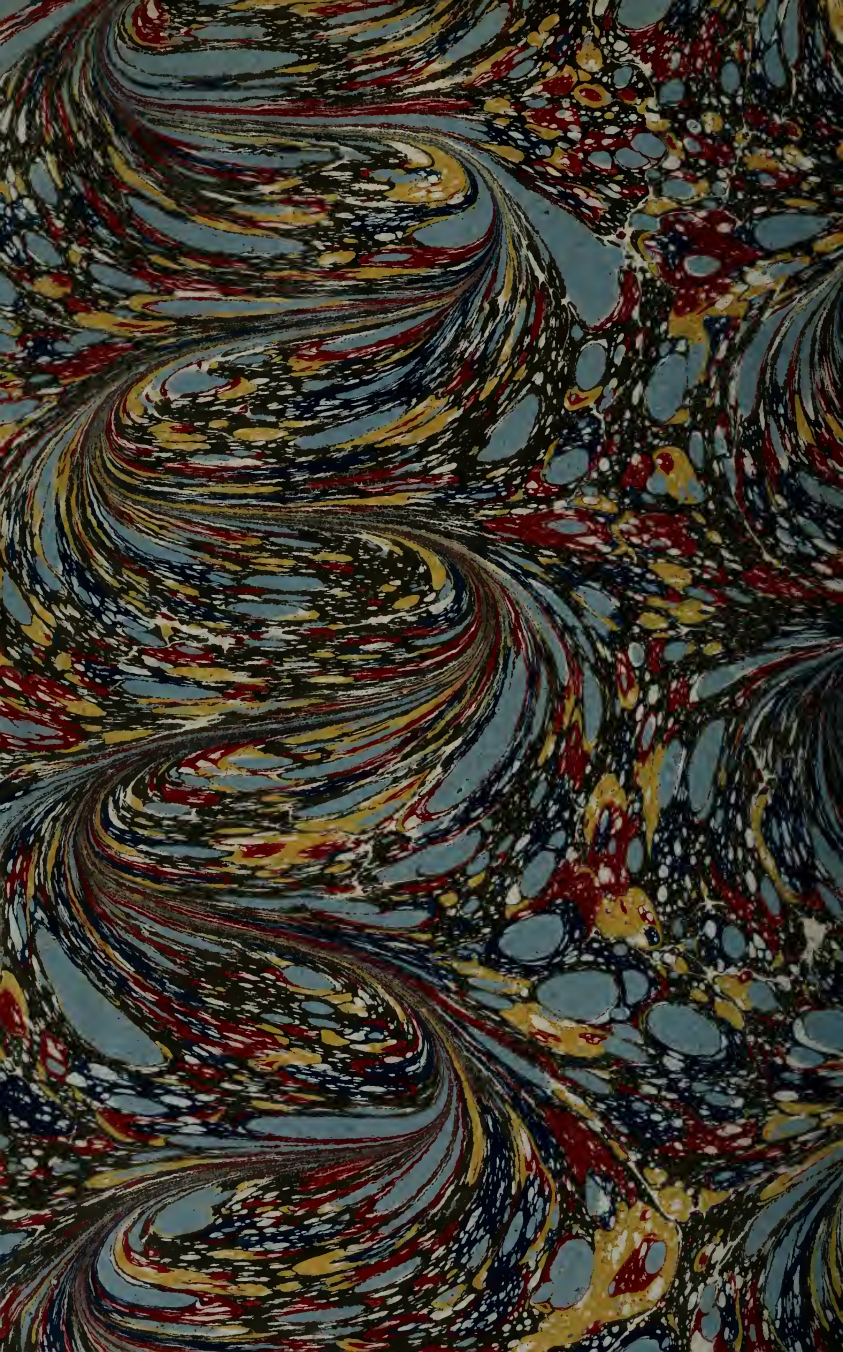
sional contract with Murkle; you will constantly have to fall back upon it. And now let us go into breakfast; but, first, I want you and your friend to come and pay us a visit at Copley Grange after you leave this."

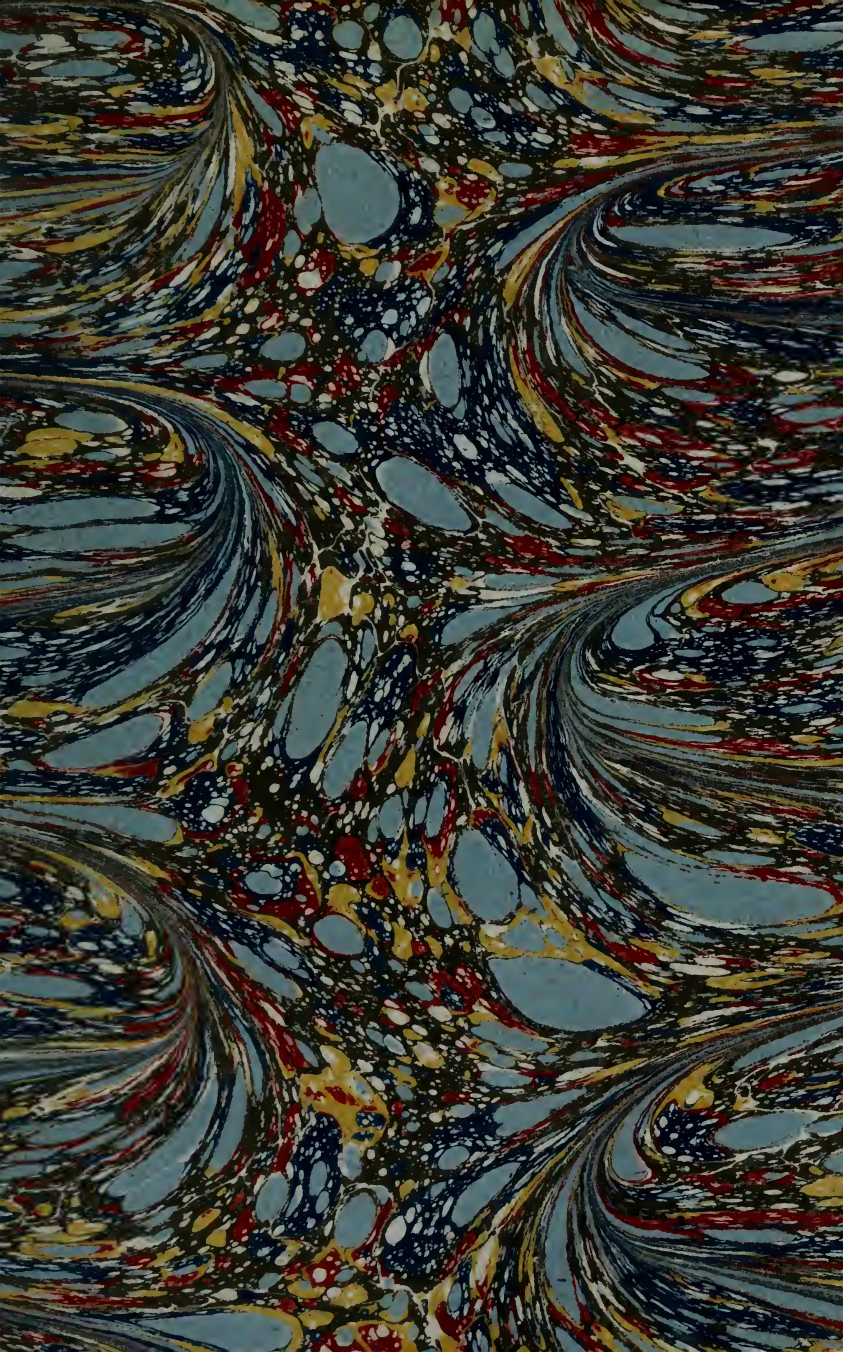
"Copley Grange! Is that anywhere near the village of Copleydale?" said Stella, surprised.

"Only two miles from it. Why, what do you know of Copleydale?" asked Lady Adela, equally astonished.

"Simply—but this, Lady Adela, is in the most profound confidence—that it is the place where your brother is probably to be found at this moment."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





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